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LAMENTATIONS: A NEW INTRODUCTION

by

Paul Martin Kaplan

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Degree of Master  
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## Digest

The book of Lamentations never explicitly reveals when or by whom it was written or even the purpose of its composition. This paper will investigate this book and attempt to offer answers to these questions: Who was the author of Lamentations? When did he write? For what purpose did he compose this work? Answers to these questions will also shed light upon the nature of biblical poetry and religious practice in the period of the Second Temple.

Three criteria endorse the possibility of single authorship for Lamentations: (1) The book exhibits an aesthetic balance built around the progression of its chapters. (2) The poetic imagery displays a consistent picture throughout the composition. (3) There is the antiquity of the tradition of the single author. The evidence for multiple authorship is unconvincing and beset with difficult, unreconciled problems. Therefore, a compelling picture develops depicting Lamentations as an integrated book by one author who probably belonged to the ruling or cultic elements of Jerusalem.

Many scholars have fixed the date of Lamentations' composition on the basis of the vividness of its descriptions. However, the existence of vividness in the poems could well derive from literary technique and creativity. Therefore, the vividness argument for the dating of the book is invalid. Since there are no specific events, internal or external to the book, which would serve as an undisputed proof of its

age, the elements to be weighed in the balance are several: a general characterization of the style of the book, the relation of its acrostic patterns to other literary acrostics, the form of the book as a national lament, the uniqueness of its language, and an artistic evaluation of the poet. On the basis of this analysis, the poet of Lamentations appears to have been a highly skilled artist. His language and syntax seems to be related to the vocabulary and style of other late additions to the Hebrew canon. Thematically, the book has a close association with Deuteronomy, especially chapter 28. Therefore, some artist, at a late, post-exilic date composed Lamentations.

A conjecture as to the purpose of Lamentations emerges from the format of the book itself, the work of Theodore Gaster, Raphael Patai, and certain verses in Zechariah. Lamentations was written during the Second Temple period, perhaps for the fasting of the month of Ab, by an author who linked it thematically with Deuteronomy. It was recited as a unified composition at the traditional seasonal ritual. The performance was a vicarious reenactment which was assumed to have a prophylactic effect, insuring the continued existence of the Temple, the priesthood, and consequently of Israel and of the natural order itself.

It is my great pleasure to express my appreciation and thanks to Dr. Samuel Greengus, my teacher, my love and gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Ben Kaplan, my parents, and, especially, my love and devotion to Andrea, my wife.

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## INTRODUCTION



When the Jew observes the fast day of Tishe B'Av, the ninth day of the month of Av, he mourns the events so clearly described in the book Second Kings.

"In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month---which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon---Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen." (2 Kings 25:8-12)

1  
The Jew remembers, among other things, the first destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem and its sanctuary in the year 586 B.C.E. at the hands of the Babylonians. As part of the ritual of that day, he reads the book Lamentations, allegedly the ancient dirge commemorating that destruction. However, the medieval biblical commentator, Ibn Ezra, already recognized a problem in this historical ascription of Lamentations to the events of 586, noting "There is not in the scroll of the Book of Lamentations any mention of Babylon or its king."<sup>2</sup>  
The short book of five chapters never explicitly reveals when or by whom it was written or even the purpose of its composition.

Our paper will investigate this problematic book and attempt to offer answers to these questions: Who was the

author of Lamentations? When did he write? For what purpose did he compose this work? Answers to these questions, hopefully, will also shed light upon the nature of biblical poetry and religious practice in the period of the Second Temple.

## CHAPTER ONE

Ancient tradition ascribed the authorship of Lamentations to the prophet, Jeremiah. The Septuagint version begins, "And it came to pass, after Israel was led into captivity, and Jerusalem laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem..."<sup>1</sup> The Targum also commences, "Jeremiah the prophet and chief priest, said..."<sup>2</sup> The medieval commentator, Rashi, maintains this tradition. "Jeremiah wrote a book of dirges. It is the scroll which Yehoiyakim burned on the hearth that was on the fire. And there were in it three alphabetical acrostics: 'How it sits,' 'How he has beclouded;' It is good he added to it 'I am the man' for it is three alphabetical acrostics, as it is written (Jeremiah 36:32) '...and further he added to them many words like them.' Three corresponding to three."<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ezra disagrees with Rashi that our Lamentations was that book. "It is not the scroll which was burned by Yehoiyakim."<sup>4</sup> However, he does not explicitly dispute Jeremiah's authorship; he merely questions the date. Perhaps he recalled the midrash:

"When was the Book of Lamentations composed?  
 R. Judah says: In the days of Jehoiakim.  
 R. Nehemiah said to him, 'Do we, then, weep over a dead person before he dies! When was the Book composed? After the destruction of the Temple; and behold proof is to be found in the words, HOW DOTH THE CITY SIT SOLITARY!"<sup>5</sup>

Hence, for the rabbis, the problem was a matter of timing, not of authorship. A single author, Jeremiah, the prophet, was said to have written the book, Lamentations, at least

after the destruction of 586, if not before the event.

The tradition of the prophet's authorship fell into discredit in the nineteenth century. Biblical critics found difficulties with this ascription and sought alternatives to it. S. R. Driver summarized the arguments against the authorship of Jeremiah.<sup>6</sup> There is variation in the alphabetic order which would tend at least to show that chapters 2, 3, and 4 may not have been written by the same author who wrote chapter one. The point of view expressed is often different than that of Jeremiah. Driver points to several apparent discrepancies between the text of Lamentations and that of Jeremiah. Since Jeremiah believed the Chaldeans were executing God's purpose upon Judah, he, Driver argued, would not invoke, or anticipate, retribution upon them as he seems to do in Lamentations 1:21f and 3:59-66. The words of 2:9c seem to be those of someone who was not a prophet. Jeremiah never looked to Egypt for help as the speaker of 4:17 apparently does. Jeremiah would not have alluded to Zedekiah in the laudatory terms of 4:20. Jeremiah's phraseology is different. Driver questions further, "It may perhaps be doubted whether a writer, who, in his literary style, followed, as Jeremiah did...the promptings of nature, would subject himself to the artificial restraint implied by the alphabetical arrangement of c. 1-4."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Driver suggests, the poet was not Jeremiah but a contemporary who knew

him and his work. However, Driver admits that multiple authorship might well account for the stylistic differences between the chapters. The fact that the alleged author(s) were contemporaries, writing about the same event, would account for the similarities of theme. Driver's theoretical sword cuts two ways. Driver primarily attempts to discredit the theory of Jeremiah's authorship of Lamentations. In doing so, he does not opt wholeheartedly for single or multiple authorship; he admits that both remain possibilities. One author, a contemporary of Jeremiah, could account for whatever similarities exist between Jeremiah and Lamentations; and the refusal to identify the two as the same poet accounts for the differences. In sum, Driver gave credence to the then current discrediting of Jeremiah's composition of Lamentations and encouraged the belief of multiple authorship to explain apparent variations of style in the chapters.

Robert Pfeffer expands this line of argument in his Introduction to the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> Lamentations represents a collection of five independent poems, though two and four could be by the same author. He bases his opinion on the diverse nature of the chapters and their alleged historical allusions. Poems one, two and four are dirges. The first chapter depicts the weeping Jerusalem. The poet bemoans Yahweh's ruinous wrath in chapter two. Chapter four is a description of siege. Chapter three, on the other hand, is, in the main, a personal lament;

the fifth poem is a lament and congregational prayer. Differing styles suggest, to Pfeiffer, different authors. If this criterion were insufficient, he has recourse to another argument: the historical focus of the poems and the apparant vividness varies. Pfeiffer, therefore, assigns them to widely different dates, from 586 to the third century. These different dates, perforce, require different authors. This reasoning is circular: the poems can be variously classified; they apparently express differing foci of interest and perspective; therefore, different poets must have written them. They could have lived in different ages; hence, they did. Thus, says Pfeiffer, we have accounted for the different classifications. Another scholar, Otto Eissfeldt, follows the same logic.<sup>9</sup> However, he avoids the assignment of multiple dates spanning centuries. He merely contents himself with the assumption that multiple classifications of style and focus imply multiple authorship. Poems one, two, and four are funeral dirges; chapter three is an individual lament; and, poem five represents a national lament. He asserts that the poems are five independently written compositions. The underlying assumption of both scholars is that multiple styles imply multiple authors. One poet would not have varied the alphabet from poem to poem nor would he have changed classification and focus. Both scholars, Pfeiffer and Eissfeldt, also assume a lack of unity in the book, finding no progression of

thought from chapter to chapter.

Georg Fohrer, by contrast, views the book as the work of one cultured poet.<sup>10</sup> Lamentations represents his refined meditations upon the disaster of 586. The author was one of the cultured upper classes who fled Jerusalem with Zedekiah. Fohrer adheres to the standard classifications of the chapters but recognizes that they do not reflect pure examples of laments or prayers. The author was an eyewitness of the events which he describes. Fohrer accepts some of the assumptions shared by other scholars who assert multiple authorship: he links the book, unquestioningly, with the events of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E.<sup>11</sup>

These scholars, Driver, Pfeiffer, Eissfeldt, and Fohrer, ignore an important factor for determining the matter of authorship. That element is the possibility of the unity of the book and, ultimately, of its purpose. At some time during the Second Temple period, at the latest, these five chapters, which we know as the book, Lamentations, were recognized as a unified composition, expressing an integrated theme, rendered on a particular occasion. A scholar like Driver may successfully refute the authenticity of Jeremiah's authorship. However, to jump from this conclusion to that of multiple authorship is not a methodological imperative, as witnessed by Fohrer's refusal to do so. Fohrer, however, does not consider the tradition which viewed Lamentations as a unit.



He seems to assume that one man wrote a random collection of laments. They have no interrelationship other than general theme. Needless to say, those scholars supporting a theory of multiple authorship do not consider the book as a homogeneous work. At the most, they would argue, some editor merely brought together five poems that seem to refer to the general subject. This theory raises more problems than it solves. Rather than just the problem of one author, one date of composition, and one purpose, the scholar must now deal with the problems of at least five authors, dates, and purposes. A solution which is complex, raising additional problems which it must solve, is less preferable than a simple solution which adequately accounts for most of the details. Fohrer's solution raises the additional problems of the book's editing and purpose. Theories of multiple authorship must solve similar questions multiplied by the number of authors proposed. Each scholarly theory, single or multiple, seems to dismiss out of hand the traditional view that one man composed a homogeneous work. Since the views of Driver, Pfeiffer, Fohrer, or Eissfeldt seem to raise additional problems in their search for a solution, perhaps the simple, traditional outlook bears re-evaluation.

The problem of authorship is ultimately one of probability. The truth of the matter is identical with that solution which is the simplest, which accounts for

as many details possible and raises the fewest unanswered questions. If an investigation of Lamentations reveals that one poet could have written it and that the book could be an integrated work, then this theory must be weighed against others in terms of its problem-solving capacity. If it is at least as possible as others, if it raises fewer difficulties while solving the problem, then this more simple solution must be considered more compelling than any other more complex one. The very fact that such a solution is traditional in no way buttresses the theory. Tradition itself has no stake in the claim of one author or unity of design. The Talmud, a repository of traditional views, at times, assigns multiple authorship, or editing, to a biblical book. The most notable example is the Pentateuch itself which the Talmud ascribes to Moses and Joshua. Dual authorship, in this case, was the better solution for the rabbis when they confronted the difficulty raised by the last eight verses of Deuteronomy. Moreover, the same source states that Hezekiah and his companions wrote, or edited, the books of Isaiah, Proverbs, and Song of Songs while the men of the Great Assembly did the same for the books of Ezekiel, the twelve minor prophets, Daniel, and Esther.<sup>12</sup>

There are many traditional notions about Lamentations which are unacceptable: Jeremiah's authorship, a dating near the time of Jerusalem's destruction in 586. Hence, an acceptance of a traditional view of a single author

and unified design, should in no way be construed as a sly defense of Tradition. An assertion of single authorship, in this case, merely proves to be the simplest and most workable when compared to more complex alternatives.

There are several reasons for viewing Lamentations as a unit. The book traditionally has been viewed as one. To suggest this much is not to assert Jeremiah's authorship. It merely means that the burden of proof falls upon those who would wish, at least, to claim multiple authorship. They must refute the fact that at some point during the Second Temple period, at the latest, the poems were, indeed, recognized as a unit which we now call Lamentations. That the prophet Jeremiah did not write the book does not nullify the possibility that some other single anonymous poet conceived it as a unified composition.

There is an aesthetic balance to the book that follows the present organization of the chapters, at least superficially. Chapter one is a general survey of events, especially relating to the priesthood and royalty. The second chapter narrows the focus to the Bet Adonai. The main characters are kings, priests, elders, maidens and young men, cultic governing figures. The intense drama of chapter two finds relief in the third chapter. This is a soliloquy, an interlude. The disaster and its meaning is seen on a personal level. The quiet, personal drama of this chapter yields to the collective scene of chapter

four. The poet describes the immediate aftermath of the violent destruction. He contemplates the horrors. There is some talk of expiation, a dominant theme of chapter three. The tone of this fourth poem is sober and calm. The concluding lines provide a transition to the next chapter. This fifth poem is a short, fast summary of events which are past. It ends with an acceptance of the situation and a plea for restoration. The significant fact is that this aesthetic progression would collapse if any of the poems were rearranged, substantially different, or missing. Scholars have spent much time dissecting the parts of the book. Little time has been spent analysing the book as a dramatically unified composition. After all, Lamentations was, at some time, organized as a unified book. The man who did so could have been one of the original authors. Nevertheless, a counter argument might assert that some editor organized five independent poems to form the above suggested pattern. This hypotheses of an "outside" editor fails to convince in the light of further evidence of unity.

Another clue to the book's unity is persistent imagery throughout the book. The imagery employed focuses on the cult and the ruling authorities. It is the city which mourns primarily for the loss of the Temple apparatus. The first verse of the book depicts Jerusalem as a mourning widow. She laments because none come to the appointed feasts, Zion's gates are desolate, her priests moan, and

her maidens are afflicted (1:4). The widow mourns for the loss of the cult. A further examination of the specific things for which the city weeps reveals an emphasis upon cultic and governmental institutions. Her princes are homeless, harried harts (1:6). The Lord has destroyed, without mercy, the kingdom and the rulers (2:2). He has laid in ruins the palaces and strongholds (2:5). The elders wear sackcloth and ashes (2:10). The aristocracy which feasted on delicacies and wore purple perish in the streets (4:5). Her beautiful princes who kept out of the harsh sun in their palaces, have turned black, dry, and shriveled in the streets (4:7-8). Princes are hung by their hands; elders receive no respect. Jerusalem mourns for the loss of her royalty and aristocracy. "The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned" (5:16).

Jerusalem also laments vividly the destruction of the Temple and its cult. The enemies invade the sanctuary (1:10). They are not just any enemy. Rather, it is the enemy whom God specifically forbade to enter the congregation. The famished priests and elders perish in the streets (1:9). In case there is any doubt as to the one responsible, the poet states, it is the Lord. He broke his booth, laid in ruins the place of his appointed feasts and sabbath, and at last spurned king and priest. Moreover, he spurned his altar, disowned his sanctuary, and delivered to the enemy her palaces (2:6-7). Jerusalem laments not

only her exiled royalty but also the absence of her Torah and the inefficacy of her prophets (2:9). Priest and prophet even die in the sanctuary itself (2:20). The Temple treasures spill about the street corners (4:1). The priests and prophets were not blameless. Because they spilled righteous blood, they wander blind and defiled. No one shows deference to priest nor elder (4:13-16). The eyes of Jerusalem grow dim "for Mount Zion which lies desolate" (5:18).

Much of the poetic imagery depicts the consequence of siege, famine, flight, and exile. Chapter three contains much of the siege imagery. Here, it is related to an individual, not the city. The Lord besieges and envelopes the narrator with bitterness and tribulation (3:5). He walls him about preventing escape (3:7). He blocks the way with hewn stone (3:9).

Vivid descriptions of famine appear throughout all of the books.

"All her people groan  
as they search for bread;  
they trade their treasures for food  
to revive their strength.  
'Look, O Lord, and behold,  
for I am despised.'" (1:11)

"...infants and babes faint  
in the streets of the city.  
They cry to their mothers,  
'Where is bread and wine?'  
as they faint like wounded men  
in the streets of the city,  
as their life is poured out  
on their mothers' bosoms." (2:11)

"He made my flesh and my skin waste away..." (3:4)

"The tongue of the nursling cleaves  
to the roof of its mouth for thirst;  
the children beg for food,  
but no one gives to them." (4:4)

"We get our bread at the peril of  
our lives,  
because of the sword in the wilderness." (5:9)

All of the poems use images of death and destruction. Zion's gates are desolate. The enemy has dragged away her maidens (1:4). "Thou didst invite as to the day of/an appointed feast/my terrors on every side/...none escaped or survived;/those whom I dandled and reared/my enemy destroyed." (2:22) "...he led me off my way and tore me/to pieces;/he has made me desolate..." (3:11) "Men dogged our steps/so that we could not walk in our/streets;/our end drew near; our days were/numbered;/for our end had come." (4:18) "Our inheritance has been turned/over to strangers,/our homes to aliens." (5:2)

Still another class of images centers on flight and capture. Once again, the usage is consistent throughout the entire book. The same author who pictures the pursuing enemy overtaking Judah in the midst of her distress (1:3), also pictures her princes like pastureless harts (1:6). The same man causes the gever of chapter three to be hunted like a bird by his enemies (3:52). He then describes them as swifter than vultures when they chased their prey on the mountains; they lay in wait in the wilderness (4:19).

The result of capture was exile. The poems express the

same attitude toward this fate also.

"...her children have gone away,  
captives before the foe." (1:5)

"The Lord himself has scattered  
them, he will regard them no more." (4:16)

The consequence of exile was servitude.

"My transgressions were bound  
into a yoke;  
by his right hand they were fastened  
together;  
they were set upon my neck;  
he caused my strength to fail;  
the Lord gave me into the hands  
of those whom I cannot  
withstand." (1:14)

"Slaves rule over us;  
there is none to deliver us from their hand." (5:8)

When the once glorious city falls, her enemies  
mock her. She realizes their deception.

"...the foe gloated over her,  
mocking at her downfall." (1:7)

"All who pass along the way  
clap their hands at you;  
they hiss and wag their heads  
at the daughter of Jerusalem;  
'Is this the city which was called  
the perfection of beauty,  
the joy of all the earth?'" (2:15)

"I have become the laughingstock of  
all peoples,  
the burden of their songs all day long." (3:14)

Contrasting imagery enables the poet to emphasize the  
degree of destruction which has befallen the city.

"Jerusalem remembers  
in the days of her affliction and  
bitterness  
all the precious things that were hers from days of  
old." (1:7)

"Her princes were purer than snow,



whiter than milk;  
 their bodies were more ruddy than coral,  
 the beauty of their form was  
 like sapphire..." (4:7)

The transformation from past glory to present degradation finds expression in the imagery of sexual sin.

"Jerusalem sinned grievously,  
 therefore she became filthy;  
 all who honored her despised her  
 for they have seen her nakedness;  
 yea, she herself groans,  
 and turns her face away." (1:8)

"Her uncleanness was in her skirts;  
 she took no thought of her doom;  
 therefore her fall is terrible,  
 she has no comforter.  
 'O Lord, behold my affliction, for the enemy has  
 triumphed!'" (1:9)

"Zion stretches out her hands,  
 but there is none to comfort her;  
 the Lord has commanded against  
 Jacob  
 that his neighbor should be his foes;  
 Jerusalem has become  
 a filthy thing among them." (1:17)

One necessary ingredient in a lament is the person doing the lamenting. The poet of Lamentations personifies Jerusalem as the mourning individual. Jerusalem is both a weeping widow and an afflicted man.

"How like a widow she has become..." (1:1)

"She weeps bitterly in the night,  
 tears on her cheeks;  
 among all her lovers  
 she has none to comfort her; all her friends have  
 dealt  
 treacherously with her,  
 they have become her enemies." (1:2)

"I am the man who has seen  
 affliction  
 under the rod of his wrath..." (3:1)

These images---of social focus, of war, of personifi-

cations---and their use remain consistent and compatible throughout Lamentations. There is no disjuncture between one image and another. Just as the imagery does not contradict itself, so also does it not aimlessly repeat itself. Each type of image described in the preceeding pages renders a purpose in the scheme of the book. These descriptions build upon each other resulting in a coherent poetic expression of national calamity and its meaning. The personifications express emotions varying from bitterness and hopelessness to ardent faith and trust in their ultimate redemption. Yahweh is both the fiery destroyer and the sure redeemer.

"From on high he sent fire;  
into my bones he made it  
descend; he spread a net for my feet; he turned  
me back;  
he has left me stunned,  
faint all the day long." (1:13)

"He has bent his bow like an enemy,  
with his right hand set like a foe;  
and he has slain all the pride of our eyes  
in the tent of the daughter of Zion;  
he has poured out his fury like fire." (2:4)

"He is to me like a bear lying in wait,  
like a lion in hiding;  
he led me off my way and tore me  
to pieces.  
He has made me desolate.  
He bent his bow and set me  
as a mark for his arrow." (3:10-12)

"...so I say, 'Gone is my glory,  
and my expectation from the  
Lord.'" (3:18)

The Lord shatters hopes and yet restores them. He is both just destroyer and righteous deliverer.

"Thou has taken up my cause, O  
 Lord,  
 thou hast redeemed my life.  
 Thou hast seen the wrong done to  
 me, O Lord;  
 judge thou my cause.  
 Thou hast seen all their vengeance,  
 all their devices against me." (3:58-60)

"The punishment of your iniquity,  
 O daughter of Zion, is  
 accomplished,  
 he will keep you in exile no longer..." (4:22)

The link between destruction and restoration is the confessing and repentant individual. He appears in chapter three, a section which constitutes a dramatic interlude and soliloquy in the book. The gever laments in personal agony over the disaster. He also discovers meaning in events and direction in repentance for his fellow human beings. His personal cry for repentance builds the foundation for the communal prayer for a return to the Lord in verse 21 of the fifth chapter.

"Let us test and examine our ways,  
 and return to the Lord!" (3:40)

"For the Lord will not  
 cast off forever,  
 but, though he cause grief, he will  
 have compassion  
 according to the abundance of  
 his steadfast love;  
 for he does not willingly afflict  
 or grieve the sons of men." (3:31-33)

This personal contrition is the pivot on which chapter three turns, and consequently the entire book.

The use of these recurring images of social focus, war, and of personifications in Lamentations is in keeping with the possibility of one poet consciously construct-

ing a homogeneous composition. The possibility becomes even more plausible when the poem's portrayals are juxtaposed with the dramatic progression created by the sequence of the chapters. The five chapters build upon each other to produce an integrated work whose total meaning transcends that of any one of its parts: Jerusalem, particularly Zion, personified, mourns for the loss of its ruling elite and the obliteration of its center of power, the Temple and its cult. The mourner grieves for their loss, manifests contrition, expresses repentance, and prays for renewal. These elements receive the most artistic attention. This artistic emphasis is in keeping with the possibility of one author.

The theological focus of Lamentations further underlines this possibility. Lamentations is a theodicy. It explains the way of God to man so that man might know why he suffers. Moreover, it explains to him what he must do to end the suffering. The tripartite elite lies in shambles because they have sinned. Unlike the modern memorial of disaster, Lamentations demonstrates little direct concern with the fate of the city, itself, or its general population. It is not a democratic document. The general suffering consequent to a disaster finds representation, if at all, only through the anguish and calamities of its ruling elite. This notion of vicarious suffering or, the reverse, welfare of the people has a long history. "The belief that the welfare of the people

depends on the behaviour and the qualities of a person who unites in himself both spiritual and political leadership is a very ancient one which is well attested among a great number of peoples." <sup>13</sup> So too, does the theological focus of Lamentations rest upon the leadership, its sins, suffering, and repentance.

All in all, Lamentations makes six accusations of sin.

1. "The Lord is the right,  
for I have rebelled against his  
word..." (1:18)
2. "Behold, O Lord, for I am in  
distress,  
my soul is in tumult,  
my heart is wrung within me,  
because I have been very,  
rebellious." (1:20)
3. "...and deal with them  
as thou hast dealt with me  
because of all my transgressions..." (1:22)
4. "Your prophets have seen for you  
false and deceptive visions;  
they have not exposed your iniquity  
to restore your fortunes,  
but have seen for your oracles  
false and misleading." (2:14)
5. "We have transgressed and rebelled,  
and thou hast not forgiven." (3:42)
6. "This was for the sins of her prophets  
and the iniquities of her priests,  
who shed in the midst of her  
the blood of the righteous." (4:13)

This brief indictment covers the leadership of Judah. The terms, "transgression" and "rebellion," are vague, conveying only a slightly more definite impression than "sin." They are, more or less, synonyms. The rebellion, however, was against the word of God. The indictment singles

out for blame three groups: prophets, priest, and royalty. The prophets transmitted false and deceptive visions; the priests, publically, shed innocent blood. The ruling aristocracy are charged, in the word rebellion, with premeditated disobedience to God's word. This term implies a conscious action. The presence of royalty as an object of blame is inferred from their prominence among those punished.

These three groups receive blame for the calamity throughout Lamentations. The prophets committed the cardinal sin of their profession. They lied. Thus, they were false to their primary charge to receive and communicate the word of God. The priestly class, too, disavowed their oath to maintain the integrity of the righteous. Instead of rewarding them and punishing the iniquitous, the priests transgressed the natural order and shed the innocent blood. The singular task of the priest was to uphold, to facilitate the natural order. Once he breached the natural law, the world could no longer stand. Symbolic of the cosmic disorder was the fall of the Temple, itself, the locus of cosmic integrity.

"...the Temple was regarded as a miniature picture of the world, and at the same time as the centre, the Navel, of the earth. The welfare of Israel, nay, of the whole world of seventy nations, was dependent on the proper performance of the service in the Temple, each stage and each moment of which had a closely determined effect on some corresponding stage or moment in the beneficial working of the forces of nature. When the Temple was destroyed the mental reaction was: now all the benefits of nature, too,

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have ceased."

The ruling aristocracy, which insured the maintenance of civil law and protection, were accomplices in the crime. The persistent emphasis upon these three groups, within the theological focus of the book, permeates Lamentations. This concern, in all of the five chapters, highlights the possibility of a single authorship directing one theme.

Therefore, three major criteria emerge which endorse the possibility of single authorship for Lamentations:

1. The book exhibits an aesthetic balance built around the progression of its chapters. The order of the chapters presents a logical movement of thought, a dramatic homogeneity with a beginning, middle, and end.
2. The poetic imagery displays a consistent picture throughout the composition. The poems focus upon the aristocracy and the cult while the book's theological inclination, also, stresses the responsibility of these groups.
3. Finally, there is the antiquity of the tradition of the single author. This criterion becomes important in light of two factors. Firstly, the evidence for multiple authorship is unconvincing and beset with difficult, unreconciled problems. Secondly, the case for single authorship, centering upon the chapter order and the poetic imagery, is possible and simple, raising fewer new, unsolvable puzzles. Lamentations, as the work of one author, becomes an organized creation with an integrated structure

of theme and character. In light of these two constituents, the ancient tradition of the single authorship of Lamentations proves compelling. One author, conceiving the five chapters as an integrated whole, could well have composed the book of Lamentations. Given the poet's attention to the ruling and cultic elements of Jerusalem and his apparent ability to write at the literate level of this lament, he probably belonged to the social classes for whom he mourns.



## CHAPTER TWO

Students of Lamentations have suggested many dates as to when the poet might have written his composition. Rabbi Nehemiah, in the midrash on Lamentations, said that the book was composed after the destruction of the Temple.<sup>1</sup> Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) agreed with the statement of the older Palestinian midrash.<sup>2</sup> Rashi (1040-1105), however, affirmed that Lamentations is the "scroll which Yehoiakim burned on the hearth..."<sup>3</sup> Since Yehoiakim ruled Judah between 609 and 598 B.C.E., Rashi, then, placed the book at a time before the Babylonian holocaust of 586 B.C.E. All of these ancient and medieval rabbis connect the lament with the events of the Babylonian threat to Jerusalem and its destruction despite their slight disagreements over the specific date. They regard the poems' depictions of war and defeat as eyewitness or prophetic eyewitness accounts of the fall of Jerusalem in the second decade of the sixth century.

Many modern scholars, likewise, conceive Lamentations as an eyewitness account, rendered into poetry, of an actual, specific historical event. They base this assumption upon the vividness of Lamentations' descriptions; their reasoning argues that anyone who writes such vivid pictures of disaster and suffering must surely have witnessed them; no one could depict such horrors so convincingly unless he saw them.

Using this "vividness argument," some scholars have attributed various chapters, if not the entire book, to

poets who might have witnessed some national disaster. They have searched the book meticulously for clues which might reveal some historical event. They have found evidence of disasters as diverse as the destruction of 586 B.C.E. and the sack of Jerusalem in 168-165 B.C.E. Solomon Zeitlin ascribes parts of the book to the seventh century. "There is a possibility that some parts of it are based on the Lamentations which were written on the occasion of the tragic death of King Josiah. Indeed the author of Chronicles says, Jeremiah lamented for Josiah...they (the laments) are written in the Lamentations." <sup>4</sup> Zeitlin uses a text from II Chronicles 35:25 for his proof. However, he ascribes most of the book to an author who lived just after the Restoration and was a follower of Zerubbabel. Driver said the poems evoke the situation shortly after the capture of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. when the kings and people were in exile. <sup>5</sup> The fifth poem came somewhat later because of its apparent distance from the events which it purportedly describes. Pfeiffer placed the poems two and four in the years 586-60 B.C.E. Presumably, these poems have the sharpest images. Chapter five fades into the years 530 B.C.E. while poem one is dimmer still, arriving with the years 520-444 B.C.E. The most obscure is chapter three. <sup>6</sup> Pfeiffer places it in the third century. He never explains why anyone would write an elaborate poem lamenting the fall of Jerusalem as late as the third century. This

kind of obscurity typifies the vividness argument. Other scholars also judge the age of the book on their appraisal of its distance from the events which they assume it depicts. Eissfeldt places all the poems close to the year 587 B.C.E.<sup>7</sup> Fohrer, meanwhile, dates them to the same general period, 587-538, though slightly closer<sup>8</sup> to the midpoint.<sup>9</sup> Norman Gottwald<sup>10</sup> and Bertil Albrektson believe the book evokes the period anywhere between 587 and the end of the Exile.

Two scholars offer unusual historical incidents to explain the events of Lamentations. Julian Morgenstern<sup>11</sup> reads the events of 445 B.C.E. in the poems. He regards Nehemiah 1:1-3 as referring to a second catastrophe.

"Now it happened in the month of Chislew, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, that Hanani, one of my brethren, came with certain men out of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that survived, who had escaped exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped exile are as in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.'"

Morgenstern states that the Temple had been rededicated in 516 B.C.E. and that subsequently Jerusalem had enjoyed rebuilding and renewed prosperity. However, in the year 445 B.C.E. it came under attack by Moabites, Ammonites and Edomites. Temple and city were destroyed once again and the population exiled. He knows the identity of the invaders from Lamentations 1:10. "The enemy has stretched out his/hands/over all her precious things;/yea, she has seen the nations/invade her sanctuary,/those whom

thou didst forbid/to enter thy congregation." The last phrase is instructive. It refers to Deuteronomy 23:3-4. "No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the Lord for ever; because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam, the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you." Morgenstern adds Edom from the mention of it in Lamentations 4:21. Because of the report of this destruction, Morgenstern asserts, Nehemiah said, "When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days; and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." (Nehemiah 1:4)

Somewhat more adventuresome is Samuel Lachs' dating of the fifth chapter of Lamentations. His own words summarize his position.

"It is our contention that neither the destruction of the Temple in 586 nor the sacking of the Temple by Ptolemy in 320 fits the material. The chapter seems to be set against the background of the attack on Jerusalem in 168 B.C.E. by Antiochus IV and the events following...We suggest, therefore, that this chapter was written against the background of these events sometime between 168-165 B.C.E. before the victory of Judah Maccabee and that it was subsequently appended to the other four chapters." 12

Lachs also claims success in finding the required allusions in the text; yet, his method of dating, based upon the commonly used criterion of vividness, makes Lachs' dating no more incredible than other, more traditional views.

Delbert Hillers prefers a date close to 586 B.C.E. and in its defense summarizes the vividness argument in a classic fashion. "The memory of the horrors of that event seems to be fresh in the mind of the author or authors. Moreover, the book at no point testifies to a belief that things would soon change for the better; the kind of hope that appeared in later exilic times had not yet arisen."<sup>13</sup>

It is evident that there are several problems with this methodology of "vividness." The first is that the book does not reveal explicitly the particular destruction of which it speaks. The fact is that a multiplicity of opinions have arisen, assigning the events recalled to a number of incidents between the seventh and the second centuries, thus discrediting the reliability of the method. Emotional states, furthermore, are not time bound. Hopelessness, like its counterpart hope, can occur in the best of times, the worst of times, any time. Since there are few, if any, documents from the period, scholars cannot evaluate accurately the collective emotional state of the age. Another problem is the fallacious assumption that a poet must first experience an event before he can write convincingly about it. This notion nullifies artistic creativity. The horrors recalled may be quite real. However, there is no sound aesthetic reason to assume that the ancient poet must have experienced Jerusalem's destruction before he could compose verse

about it. Such an assumption underestimates the skill and craftsmanship of the artist. The poetic imagination, indeed, may be richer than real-life witness. Dante, certainly, did not have to experience a literal Hell before he could create a vivid picture of it. Homer did not experience the tragedy of Troy before he composed his vivid epic. There is no need to deny the same kind of artistry and imagination to the biblical poet. The existence of vividness in the poems could well derive from literary technique and creativity. All that was required of these artists was tradition, language, literary convention, imagination and skill. We, therefore, find the vividness argument for the dating of Lamentations to be invalid.

In our view, any methodological process which seeks to date the book must first confront it on the basis of its style. Since there are no specific events, internal or external to the book, which would serve as an undisputed proof of its age, the elements to be weighed in the balance are several: a general characterization of the style of the book, the relation of its alphabetic patterns to other literary acrostics, the relation of its form as a national lament to other Near Eastern and biblical laments, the uniqueness of its language, and, finally, an artistic evaluation of the the poet.

Delbert Hillers provides an excellent summary of  
<sup>14</sup>  
 the general style of Lamentations. The entire sub-

ject of Hebrew meter, parallelism, and syntax is extremely complex. Scholars such as Holscher, Mowinkel, Horst, and Segert believe that the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables of the same length characterize Hebrew meter. Julius Ley and Eduard Sievers propose a system in which accent is paramount. Rhythmic patterns in this school are marked by numbers. Hence, a poetic line of two parts each with two accents is represented as 2+2. Karl Budde, in an essay "Das hebräische Klagelied," which appeared in 1882, offered the classical analysis of the meter of Lamentations. He said that the basic unit is a line divided into two parts, broken by sense. The second part, of at least two words, is shorter than the first. Budde found this pattern particularly evident in chapter three but also present in chapters one, two, and four. Chapter five follows a more typical biblical pattern in which the first part of a line equals the length of its second part. Budde found the metrical pattern of the first four chapters elsewhere in the Bible, allegedly associated with laments. He named the meter the Kinah. Sievers modified Budde's analysis, showing that many lines do not fit the Kinah pattern. "Thus Budde's view must be modified by saying that the 'Qinah' line is at best the dominant line in Lamentations; other metric patterns occur more or less at random throughout the first four chapters. Atypical verses are especially common in chapter 1, and less so in chapter 3. The



result of this mixture is that the meter is not nearly as useful in text-criticism as it might be."<sup>15</sup> Sievers also noted that the dominant rhythm occurs in Hebrew poetry unrelated to laments like Song of Songs 1:9-11. Some funeral songs, like 2 Samuel 1:17-27, do not use the "Qinah" meter.

Hillers notes that even parallelism is not present throughout Lamentations. He disregards what is commonly known as synthetic or constructive parallelism, or formal parallelism. In such a case, both halves of the verse allegedly constitute a single idea, the closing part developing or explaining the opening. There is, otherwise, no clear parallel relationship between the two. Hillers discovered that 104 (39%) of the 266 lines of the book have no parallel structure. Chapter five contains the most parallelism (86% or nineteen lines). "By contrast, in the first four chapters 101 of 244 lines (41%) do not contain parallelism. This contrast amplifies...(the) notion of the different poetic style employed in chapters 1-4 as over against 5, which is not solely a metrical difference."<sup>16</sup> One further feature of the poetic style deserves note. Thought units do not necessarily coincide with acrostic units. Very often ideas or images appearing in one acrostic unit, like aleph, continues into the next unit, like bet. Hillers calls this phenomenon syncopation.

This review of the general style of Lamentations,

based on Hillers, reveals several points. The book is complex, apparently constructed within recognized patterns and canons of poetry. While there is a discernable and dominant metrical pattern, the Kinah, it is neither consistent nor exclusive. Moreover, it is not necessarily even the only meter of the lament.<sup>17</sup> Apparently several variations in style appear in Lamentations. This variety does not preclude one poet as the sole author of the book. A creative artist might very well change aspects of his style as the better communication of his message demanded. Hence, various metrical patterns were employed to convey his ideas. This ability suggests a poet adept at his craft. Similarly, his use of parallelism also invokes the image of an artist who feels free to vary poetic devices for the sake of his art. He is not bound by any fixed pattern. In addition, the movement of thought units across the seeming limits of the acrostic units shows a man rejecting the self imposed boundaries of form. This fact alone contradicts the notion that the acrostic form of Lamentations was a severe hindrance to the free expression of the poet's ideas.<sup>18</sup> This survey of general style demonstrates that technique did not bind the poet's creativity. On the contrary, he used it freely as a tool of his craft. Thus far, the style of Lamentations, its metrical patterns and parallelisms, alone, cannot date the book. The student, therefore, must examine the book's other qualities for clues of its date.

The acrostic employed in Lamentations is one of its most obvious characteristics. It was no more of an external limitation of the poet's free expression than the sonnet form would be to others centuries later. The alphabetic acrostic, according to Ralph Marcus, was merely a common poetic structure in late antiquity.<sup>19</sup> It is known in late biblical, early Christian, pagan and Gnostic literatures. Marcus divides acrostic literature in four groups. There are didactic acrostics which were designed to teach the alphabet or convey moral instruction. The section of Proverbs 31:10-31 would be an example. The second type of acrostic is the liturgical. Under this heading, he placed lists of divine attributes (Psalm 145), hymns of praise and thanksgiving (Psalm 34), petitions and laments (Lamentations 1-4) and various metrical homilies (Psalm 37). The third group are the oracular acrostics found in Greece and Asia Minor from the third century to Christian times. The last kind of this literature includes the Gnostic varieties, even the Sefer Yisirah, Third Enoch 44:9, and the alphabetic midrash of Rabbi Akiba. Whatever the type, alphabetic acrostics are common in the Hebrew Scriptures. They occur in Nahum 1, Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145, Proverbs 31:10-31, and the first four chapters of Lamentations.

Even the acrostic form of these four chapters varies. Chapter one has twenty-two verses. Each verse, in turn,

has three lines. The first line in each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. Chapter two also has twenty-two verses, each composed of three lines, the first beginning with the letter of the alphabet in question. The order of the alphabet is unusual, the peh preceeding the ayin. Chapter three consists of sixty-six verses. Each successive group of three lines contains the same letter. The next chapter, four, follows a pattern similar to two. Instead of each verse containing three lines, the unit is two, with the acrostic pattern reversing the ayin and the peh. The last chapter, five, is not an acrostic at all. It does, however, contain twenty-two verses, corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

The varying acrostics of Lamentations likewise suggests a skilled poet, using technique to highlight his message. Instead of one rigid structure plodding from chapter to chapter, the use of various acrostic patterns, demonstrates flexibility. A poet who could vary his external form would hardly feel his expression limited by structural requirements. Ralph Marcus testifies that acrostics were a common literary form in the ancient Mediterranean world. Although the phenomenon cannot date a text with precision, it does suggest a time and place somewhere in the Mediterranean region in late antiquity. The evidence seems to point to a poet acquainted with the devices of ancient literary art,

possibly writing in the period known as late antiquity, sometime after the last part of the fourth century.

The literary genre of Lamentations, the national lament, buttresses the contention that the poet knew literary technique very well. A comparison of Lamentations with other ancient Near Eastern national laments, biblical and non-biblical, shows that he chose a classification of literature which had been practiced for centuries and, therefore, would have been well known to his audience. The ancient Middle East knew of the lament for the fallen city at least as early as the Sumerians. Two of these poems provide an interesting contrast to the biblical composition. S. N. Kramer translated and titled the two poems, Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur and Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur. Kramer felt that the influence of the Sumerian poems on the biblical book was great. "Just how deeply this mournful literary genre affected the neighboring lands is unknown, no lamentations have as yet been recovered from Hittite, Canaanite and Hurrian sources. But there is little doubt that the biblical Book of Lamentations owes no little of its form and content to its Mesopotamian forerunners, and, that the modern orthodox Jew who utters his mournful lament at the 'western wall' of 'Solomon's' long-destroyed Temple, is carrying on a tradition begun in Sumer some 4,000 years ago..."<sup>20</sup>

On a stricter level of comparison, however, the

biblical book differs from its ancient predecessors. The Sumerian compositions, differing in content as well as form, lack the element of divine morality. In the older poems destruction comes from a decree of the divine pantheon, some gods agreeing and others disagreeing. Not only does the poet lament but also some of the gods do likewise. Destruction may result in a perversion of the natural order but it was not caused by it. The reason for the calamity is vague and almost of a capricious nature.

"The verdict of the assembly cannot be turned back,  
The word commanded by Enlil knows no overturning,  
Ur was granted kingship, it was not granted an eternal  
reign,  
Since days of yore when the land was founded to (now)  
when people have multiplied,  
Who has (ever) seen a reign of kingship that is  
everlasting!" 21

Calamity occurs simply because its time has come. Unlike the biblical story, the people committed no discernable sin for which they are punished. The Sumerian poet finds consolation in the fact that no one lives forever. Such an explanation hardly suited the biblical poet. The Sumerian poet, although realizing the divine source of the destruction, still could find no explanation for it.

"One city which exists no longer, my (city) attacked  
without cause..." 22

The Sumerian lamentations literally occur on a mythological level. They are dialogues between gods and goddesses with an occasional human interjection. Urban destruc-

tion is decreed on a plane far from human control. It seems to be the visible result of some divine game. This Sumerian world view contrasts sharply with role of morality in the biblical destruction. Here, Jerusalem sins and God punishes. There is no caprice and a great deal of human control implied.

The Sumerian lamentations express concern over the loss of temple precincts and the various other institutions associated with the city. They lament primarily priest and shrine but also depict the suffering of the population. It is this area of concern which provokes most of the attention of those seeking parallels with biblical lamentations. Theodore Gaster compiled a list of many of these alleged parallels between the biblical Lamentations and its Sumerian counterparts.<sup>23</sup> Some of them, indeed, are quite remarkable; others are not very convincing. The sample which appears below contains the most convincing of the parallels. All derive from the Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur, as translated by S. N. Kramer. The numbers in parentheses refer to the respective lines in the poems.

1. a. "Bitterly weeps she at night." (Lam. 1:2)
  - b. "Because of its (affliction) in my nightly sleeping place, in my nightly sleeping place verily there is no peace for me..." (100)
2. a. "The foeman has put forth his hand against all her precious things." (Lam. 1:10)
  - b. "My treasure verily has been dissipated," (279)

3. a. "Zion stretches out her hands." (Lam. 1:17)
  - b. "The house stretches out the hands to thee." (371)
4. a. "The Lord in his anger beclouds the daughter of Zion." (Lam. 2:1)
  - b. "The day was deprived of the rising of the bright sun, the goodly light." (190)
5. a. "The Lord has destroyed...all the pastures of Jacob." (Lam. 2:2)
  - b. "He has abandoned his stable, his sheepfold (has been delivered) to the wind." (1)
6. a. "He has broken down his booth like that of a garden." (Lam. 2:6)
  - b. "My house founded by the righteous, like a garden hut, verily on its side has caved in." (128)
7. a. "The Lord has done what he purposed, has consummated his word which he ordained of old." (Lam. 2:17)
  - b. "Anu changes not his command; Enlil alters not the command which he had issued." (168-169)
8. a. "Pour out thy heart like water." (Lam. 2:19)
  - b. "O queen, make thy heart like water." (331)
9. a. "The holy stones lie scattered at the top of every street." (Lam. 4:1)
  - b. "My (precious) metal, stone, and lapis lazuli have been scattered about." (278)
10. a. "Blacker than soot is their visage; they are not recognized in the streets." (Lam. 4:8)
  - b. "Dirt has been decreed for them; verily their appearance has changed." (358)
11. a. "He has kindled a fire in Zion and it has consumed her foundations." (Lam. 4:11)



11. b. "Enlil calls Gibil, the firegod, to his aid." (180)
12. a. "Our dance is turned to a dirge." (Lam. 5:15)
  - b. "Thy song has been turned into weeping; thy...music has been turned into lamentation." (359-60)
13. a. "...Mount Zion which lies desolate; foxes walk upon it." (Lam. 5:18)
  - b. "In the rivers of my city dust has gathered; into fox-dens verily have they been made." (269)

Most of the parallels reflect common imagery, as in the first example, where the poet describes nightly weeping. Sometimes, as in the sixth example, the wording of the imagery is quite close. It is not the purpose of this paper to debate the issue of direct cultural borrowing. There is little likelihood that the poet of Lamentations actually read his Sumerian predecessors in this genre. Indeed, a millenium or more separates sixth century Israel from these compositions. Saying that the poems employ a similar imagery need not be proof of direct borrowing. It denies to the author any sense of creativity or common emotion deriving from common experiences. The common conception and experience of calamitous destruction would evoke a common imagery at the pens of ancient poets. There is no need to assume that every stylus wielding scribe was an unimaginative copiest, an ancient, human xerox machine. Hence, two men living a millenium apart, might have described similar events with parallel imagery; the known consequences of a siege

and sack of a city would have been similar.<sup>24</sup> This evidence points to an author writing within a literary genre long established in the ancient Near East. There is no need to posit the existence of words, or even phrases and cliches, transmitted from age to age, from culture to culture. It is enough to assume that common experience and culturally conditioned imagination underlies parallel word useage. The existence of common language merely demonstrates that Lamentations could have been written at any time, at a very early date as well as a late one. The Sumerian national lament existed at a very early period; it was likewise known in ancient Israel as a recognized type of poetic expression. These considerations argue for the existence of a highly developed form of expression, the national lament, which tended to be timeless in its phrasing.

Many other national laments are found in the Bible. Eissfeldt points to a number of them in I Kings 21:9-12, Jeremiah 36:1-10, Joel 1:13-14 and 11:12-17, and Judith 4:9-12. He, also, classifies Psalms 44, 60, 74, 78, 79, 80, 83, and 89 as national laments. There are echoes of a national lament in I Maccabees 1:36-40, 2:7-13, 3:45, 50-53. Examination of these latter verses reveal phrases highly reminiscent of Lamentations. It would be impossible as well as unnecessary to assume any direct borrowing. Psalm 44 also employs an imagery common to Lamentations.

"Yet thou hast cast us off and abased  
us,

and hast not gone out with our armies.  
 Thou hast made us turn back from  
 the foe;  
 and our enemies have gotten  
 spoil.  
 Thou hast made us like sheep for  
 slaughter,  
 and hast scattered us among the  
 nations.  
 Thou hast sold thy people for a  
 trifle,  
 demanding no high price for them.  
 Thou hast made us the taunt of our  
 neighbors,  
 the derision and scorn of those  
 about us.  
 Thou hast made us a byword among  
 the nations,  
 a laughingstock among the  
 peoples.  
 All day long my disgrace is before  
 me,  
 and shame has covered my face,  
 at the words of the taunters and  
 revilers,  
 at the sight of the enemy and the  
 avenger." (Psalm 44:9-16)

These biblical verses, even without the Sumerian nation-  
 al laments, underline the possibility that a literary  
 classification, the lament for a fallen city or nation,  
 existed for centuries in ancient Israel. Given the  
 occurrence of many such consistent laments in the realm  
 of biblical literature, it is highly probable that the  
 poet of Lamentations knew of their form and consciously  
 utilized it.<sup>25</sup> Genre, alone, however, cannot reveal the  
 date of Lamentations. A poet could have written in this  
 form at any date from the Sumerian period to the late or  
 even post biblical era. This analysis of the biblical and  
 Sumerian laments points to the work of a conscious  
 literary artist, composing, in this case, sometime in

the biblical period.

The study of one verse uncovers the extent of the poet's skill. The following is the opening verse of chapter four.

עַד כִּי הִפְּךָ אֶת-הַזָּהָב הַזֶּה  
 וְהַאֲבִיטָה אֶת-הַבְּרִיטָה הַזֶּה  
 וְהַאֲבִיטָה אֶת-הַבְּרִיטָה הַזֶּה  
 וְהַאֲבִיטָה אֶת-הַבְּרִיטָה הַזֶּה

"How the gold has grown dim,  
 how the pure gold is changed!  
 The holy stones lie scattered  
 at the head of every street."

The verse is typical because the author uses common poetic elements which contain slight, but significant adjustments. The imagery involves striking contrast. That which represents timeless, unchanging value and substance has changed. Gold, normally, does not lose its lustre permanently; it never changes or depreciates. It is the index of value. When gold dims, or the finest gold changes, an unnatural event occurs. Similarly, When sacred jewels lie in the gutter, all sense of value has reversed; the natural world has turned upside down. Hence, the poet conveys a startling image of contrast and counterpoint. Jerusalem, the city of gold, God's dwelling place, lies in ruins, an apparently impossible reality. The index of value no longer exists. Natural law has reversed itself and, by doing so, abolished its own existence. The poet evokes this incomprehensible event with an imagery conveying impossible notions.

The ruin of Jerusalem is as incredible as the diminution of gold. The destruction of its sanctuary is as unbelievable as the treatment of gems as garbage. The poet evokes this picture with the phrases *ישא רכתם פסול* paralleled by *ככר יצא זר*. The parallel is nearly synonymous. The second line contains no internal parallelism. This line lies in a relationship of formal or synthetic parallelism to the first line; the imagery is parallel rather than the wording. This kind of developmental structure is typical of the book as a whole, making the classification of the verses difficult. As Hillers pointed out, strict parallelism, often does not even exist in the poems.

The exclamatory *ככר* of the first half line is offset by the use of the adjective *פסול* in the second part of the line. The more common use of the word *ככר* is as an interrogative but it is used four times as an exclamation in Lamentations.<sup>26</sup> The fact is significant because the word occurs only in two other places in this usage of exclamation, Isaiah 1:21 and Jeremiah 48:17.<sup>27</sup> In both cases the speaker exclaims about the change of a natural state from a normal form to an abnormal one. Hence, the use of the word, *ככר*, in Lamentations possibly would sound consistent but slightly unusual to the original listeners. This kind of communication reveals an author aware of literary forms and sensitive to their manipulation.

This sensitivity to style appears elsewhere. The word *סח* appears only here as a third person masculine singular, imperfect Hophal form. The root *סח* occurs elsewhere only in Ezekiel 28:3 and 31:8. The listener again hears a novel word consistent with the unique imagery of destruction. The word *סח* is very common. What is uncommon about it is the juxtaposition with the notion conveyed in *סח*. On a more subtle level, there is the rare parallel of *סח* with *סח*. The usual complement of *סח* is *סח*. The pair *סח/סח* occurs forty-one times in the Bible. The word *סח* occurs much less frequently, about a dozen times. Most often, it occurs alone or with *סח*. The words *סח* and *סח* appear as parallel pairs twice; and both times, Job 31:24 and Proverbs 25:12, *סח* precedes *סח* in the line. In neither case is the syntax identical to Lamentations 4:1. Once again, the poet demonstrates his literary sensitivity and creativity by choosing possible poetic novelties. Lexical novelty matches the quality of the events. Even the qualifying adjective *סח* is unusual. The more common modifiers of *סח* are *סח* (Ct. 5:11) and *סח* (Jb. 28:19). The verb of this phrase, *סח*, though common, never appears in a similar context. Its active form further contrasts with the passive of *סח*.

The second line is really the third unit or phrase of the verse. It continues with the notion of the re-

versal of the natural order. The poet still employs the  
 imagery of precious objects. Again, the words chosen  
 reveal the care and skill of the author. The verb תשתכנע  
 is not the usual poetic complement of either 'שנא' or 'אזל'.  
 As in the two previous phrases, the verb begins the unit  
 followed by the subject, אבן'קדש. The verb literally  
 conveys a notion of complete reversal; the subject was  
 overturned, spilled out. The use of the verb שפך also  
 suggests the common phrase שפך דם, the spilling  
 of blood. The word is rich in connotations. The sub-  
 ject, אבן'קדש, is unique. The usual way of express-  
 ing the idea, precious stones, is אבן יקר. Moreover,  
 whenever אבן יקר occurs, it often follows and is parallel  
 to the word דם. It is so found in 2 S. 12:30,  
 1 K. 10:2, and 2 Ch. 9:1. Once it follows כסף (Dn. 11:38)  
 and once comes after כסף and דם. The common  
 poetic line would pair דם with כסף or with אבן יקר.  
 If all three were used in the parallel, the standard  
 phrase would probably contain the combination דם...כסף...אבן יקר.  
 The skill of our poet now is apparent in the changes he  
 made in this common poetic parallel. The listener, accustom-  
 ed to the standard usage, would wait for כסף when he  
 heard דם. This poet startled him with his use of  
 a variant of a rare complement דם...כסף. Progressing  
 to the third phrase, or second line, the listener was  
 prepared to hear אבן יקר after he heard דם. Instead,  
 the poet, again, jolted his expectations by declaiming

the unique phrase *עֲצֵק - יָקָר*.

This subject, holy stones, is more suggestive, for the artist's purpose, than the usual parallel *אֲבָן יָקָר*, precious stones. It evokes imagery of the sanctuary by use of the term *עֲצֵק*, holy. The poet recalls some sort of sacred gems like those in the priestly breastplate used for cultic functions. Such stones, normally secluded in the most private precinct, now lay in the most public area, the street corner. The poet depicts this profanation of the holy not only in the general term *עֲצֵק - יָקָר* but in *עֲצֵק* itself. This word implies the specially set aside, the isolated, the taboo, the untouchable. The line conveys sharp, unthinkable contrast. The juxtaposition of *עֲצֵק*, holy, and *חֳצוֹת*, streets, further brings out antithetical images. A holy object poured out at the head of every street defies all sense of priestly protocol. It is the ultimate desecration. By skillfully changing *אֲבָן יָקָר* to *עֲצֵק - יָקָר*, the artist constructed a powerful metaphor, rich in connotations. Not only has he suggested ruthless desecration but the murder of the Lord's consecrated. The word *פָּשַׁע*, poured out, as mentioned, recalls bloodshed. The poet employs a metonymy: the sacred stones evoke the priesthood slain on every street. The man who constructed this opening verse was a skillful, conscious artist. He achieved his artistry through a manipulation of existing literary convention. The example we have cited is but



one of many which could be adduced to demonstrate skill and originality.

The careful wording and phrasing of Lamentations exposes the depth of this stylized poetry. The author manipulated known form to achieve his own creation. The use of stylized words and their manipulation provides the first real clue for the specific dating of the composition. The author utilized words and phrases already familiar to the biblical audience. The linking of the vocabulary and syntax of Lamentations to a literature with a common diction and world view may yield the necessary evidence for the approximate date of the book. The words and phrases were familiar by virtue of their use in other biblical books.

#### Chapter One:

1.  $\gamma \theta \alpha \rho \psi \iota + \beta \beta$  (Lam. 1:1): Is. 27:10; Dt. 32:12; Dt. 33:28; Lev. 13:46; Jer. 49:31; Num. 23:9; Mi. 7:14; Ps. 4:9; Lam. 1:3; Lam. 3:28.
2.  $\delta \mu \omega \nu \iota \kappa$  (Lam. 1:2): Lam. 1:9; Lam. 1:17; Lam. 1:21.
3.  $\kappa \alpha \nu \beta \iota \mu$  (Lam. 1:2): Jer. 13:17.
4.  $\kappa \alpha \tau \alpha$  (Lam. 1:3): Ju. 18:30; 2K. 17:23; 2K. 25:21; Is. 5:13; Jer. 1:3; Jer. 52:27; Ez. 12:3; Ez. 39:23; Am. 1:5; Am. 5:5; Am. 6:7; Am. 7:11; Am. 7:17; Mi. 1:6.
5.  $\kappa \alpha \tau \alpha \nu \iota \kappa$  (Lam. 1:3): Ju. 8:4; Gn. 14:14; Ex. 14:23; Lev. 26:36-37; Pr. 28:1; Jos. 2:16; Jos. 2:22; Neh. 9:11; Is. 30:16.
6.  $\kappa \alpha \tau \alpha \nu \iota \kappa$  (Lam. 1:3): Gn. 8:9; Is. 34:14; Ps. 84:4; Jer. 45:3.
7.  $\kappa \alpha \tau \alpha \nu \iota \kappa$  (Lam. 1:4): Ez. 22:26; Ps. 132:9, 16; 2Ch. 6:41; Ps. 78:64.

8. פֶּסֶק שֶׁ' (Lam. 1:5): Am. 9:4; Dt. 28:41;  
Na. 3:10; Jer. 20:6; Jer. 22:22; Jer. 30:16;  
Ez. 12:11; Ez. 30:17-18; Is. 46:2; Lam. 1:18.

### Chapter Two:

9. בֶּת צִיּוֹן (Lam. 2:1): Is. 1:8; Is. 10:32;  
Is. 16:1; Is. 62:11; Mi. 1:13; Mi. 4:8;  
Mi. 4:10; Mi. 4:13; Jer. 4:31; Jer. 6:2,23;  
Zp. 3:14; Zc. 2:14; Zc. 9:9; Ps. 9:15;  
Lam. 1:6; Lam. 2:1; Lam. 2:4; Lam. 4:22.
10. כֹּאשׁ לְרִבְרָבָה (Lam. 2:3): Is. 5:24;  
Ps. 105:32; Ex. 9:24; Ps. 29:7; Ho. 7:6;  
Num. 27:28; Jer. 48:45; Is. 4:5; Dn. 11:3;  
Jo. 1:19; Jo. 2:3.
11. מַחְמַצ' עֵץ (Lam. 2:4): Ho. 9:16; 1K. 20:6;  
Ez. 24:16.
12. בֵּית שֹׁחַת (Lam. 2:5): 2S. 20:19-20.
13. אֵלֶּם אֶמְלִיכָם (Lam. 2:8): Is. 19:2; Ho. 4:3;  
Is. 24:4; Is. 24:7; Is. 33:9; Jo. 1:10;  
Jer. 14:2.
14. שֶׁרָק לְנוֹעַם (Lam. 2:15): Zp. 2:15.

### Chapter Three:

15. בִּשְׁבַט עֲבֹדָתוֹ (Lam. 3:1): Pr. 22:8.
16. חֹשֶׁק וְלֹא אֵלֶּם (Lam. 3:2): Gn. 1:2, 4;  
Is. 45:7; Jb. 26:10; Ec. 2:13.
17. אֵרֶב (Lam. 3:10): Ps. 10:9.
18. צֶרֶךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ (Lam. 3:12): Jer. 51:3;  
Ps. 11:2; Ps. 37:14; Ps. 7:13; Lam. 2:4;  
Zc. 9:13; Ps. 58:8; Ps. 64:4; Ps. 46:9;  
Jer. 50:14; Jer. 50:29; 1Ch. 5:18;  
1Ch. 8:40; 2Ch. 14:7; Is. 21:15; Is. 5:28.
19. חֹסֶם לְרַחֵם (Lam. 3:22): Ps. 77:9;  
Jer. 16:5; Ho. 12:3; Ps. 103:4.
20. רִיבָה מִשְׁפָּט (Lam. 3:36): 2S. 15:2,4;  
Ho. 4:1; Ho. 12:3; Mi. 6:2; Jer. 25:31;  
Ez. 44:24.
21. לִפְטוֹת מִשְׁפָּט (Lam. 3:25): Ex. 23:6;

1S. 8:3; Dt. 16:19; Dt. 24:17; Dt. 27:19.

#### Chapter Four:

22.  $\text{נצח} // \text{נצח}$  (Lam. 4:2): 2S. 17:28;  
Ps. 2:9; Jer. 19:11.
23.  $\text{חלל} // \text{חלל}$  (Lam. 4:6): 1S. 20:1;  
Jb. 13:23; Is. 5:18; Is. 43:24; Is. 59:2;  
Jer. 5:25; Jer. 16:10; Lam. 4:13; Dn. 9:16;  
Ho. 4:8; Ho. 13:2.
24.  $\text{קלל} // \text{קלל}$  (Lam. 4:12): 1S. 2:8;  
Is. 14:21; Is. 24:4; Is. 34:1; Jer. 10:12;  
Jer. 51:15; 1Qh. 16:30; Jb. 34:13; Ps. 19:5;  
Ps. 77:19; Ps. 94:4; Ps. 90:2; Ps. 96:13;  
Ps. 98:6.
25.  $\text{נחל} // \text{נחל}$  (Lam. 4:13): 2K 23:2;  
Is. 28:7; Jer. 5:31; Jer. 6:13; Jer. 8:10;  
Jer. 14:18; Jer. 23:11; Jer. 23:33;  
Jer. 23:34; Jer. 26:7,8,11,16; Jer. 29:1;  
Lam. 2:20.
26.  $\text{נחש} // \text{נחש}$  (Lam. 4:13): Gn. 9:6;  
Gn. 37:22; Nu. 35:33; Lev. 17:4; Dt. 21:7;  
Is. 25:31; 1K. 18:28; 2K. 21:16; 2K. 24:4;  
1Ch. 22:8; Ez. 16:38; Ez. 22:4,6,9,12,29;  
Ez. 23:45; Ez. 33:25; Ez. 36:18; Pr. 1:10;  
Ps. 79:3; Ez. 18:10; Ez. 22:3; 1K. 2:31;  
Jer. 22:3; Jer. 22:17; 1Ch. 22:8; 1Ch. 28:3;  
Pr. 6:17.

#### Chapter Five:

27.  $\text{נחל} // \text{נחל}$  (Lam. 5:2): Ob. 1:1;  
Pr. 7:5; Pr. 2:16.
28.  $\text{נחל} // \text{נחל}$  (Lam. 5:3): Ex. 22:23;  
Ps. 109:9, 12; Jb. 24:9.
29.  $\text{נחל} // \text{נחל}$  (Lam. 5:4): Jos. 9:21;  
Jos. 9:23,27; Dt. 29:10.

This listing is not exhaustive but is sufficient to illustrate that the author of Lamentations was no literary amateur. . He was well aware of biblical poetic style. He used words, phrases, and word parallel combinations

common to the known canons of biblical poetic artistry. The author also uses certain phrases repeatedly in his own composition. More than forty-two words and phrases appear as internal parallels in Lamentations. itself.

A small sample conveys the point:

30.  $\text{אין מנחם}$  Lam. 1:2, 9, 17, 21.
31.  $\text{'אין}$  Lam. 1:3, 7, 9; 3:19.
32.  $\text{בתולדות}$  Lam. 1:4; 2:10; 5:11.
33.  $\text{פיו}$  Lam. 1:5, 12; 3:32.
34.  $\text{אין קראת}$  Lam. 1:12, 21; 3:58-66;  
4:21-22.
35.  $\text{כאין מנחם}$  Lam. 1:4; 2:6, 7, 22.

Considering the total number of lines in the poems, the highly stylized nature of the poems comes into sharp focus. The large proportion of internal and external parallels reveals an author aware of the traditional elements of style. Moreover, just as he used many familiar elements of style, he also tampered with these and added unusual words or combinations. Many words and phrases are uncommon or are completely unique as they appear in Lamentations. The best known of these types are

$\text{אין מנחם}$ ,  $\text{אין מנחם}$ ,  $\text{'אין}$  (Lam. 1:1);  $\text{אין מנחם}$  (Lam. 1:3);

and  $\text{אין}$  (Lam. 2:1).

This examination of the poet's literary skill reveals important clues as to the composition's date. There is a clustering of vocabulary in chronologically late books of the Bible. Number 18, for example, has

parallels in Chronicles and Zecariah. Zephaniah and Zecariah appear in example nine. Number 15 has a parallel expression in Proverbs; Jonah and Daniel contain expressions found in Lamentations 2:3. Lamentations 4:17 has parallel usages in Job 11:20 while there is a relationship between Esther 1:5 and 2:12 with Lamentations 4:18. Word parallels with Esther 7:6 and Lamentations 1:5 also occur. A detailed analysis of every verse and word in Lamentations uncovers the same phenomenon. The vocabulary and phraseology of this book has an affinity with late books of the Hebrew canon such as Job, Esther, Kings, Chronicles, Jonah, Zecariah, Zephaniah, Proverbs, Psalms, and Ezekiel. When various elements must be weighed in the balance in order to achieve the most likely date of composition this factor attains great importance. On the basis of word usage alone, Lamentations, is, beyond any doubt, a late composition, even post-exilic.

There is another important fact which substantiates the conclusion based on word usage. There is a close thematic link between Lamentations and Deuteronomy, especially chapter twenty-eight. In this pentateuchal book, the author spells out the word of God. He enunciates a series of specific crimes and their punishments. The poet, in Lamentations 2:17, states that Jerusalem's punishment was no act of caprice. It was deserved. It was the threatened apodosis of some divinely declaimed protasis.

"The Lord has done what he purposed,  
has carried out his threat;  
as he ordained long ago,  
he has demolished without pity;  
he has made the enemy rejoice over you,  
and exalted the might of your foes." (Lam. 2:17)

The Lord, then, threatened to give strength to the enemy, cause him to destroy Jerusalem, and, therefore, make Zion the laughingstock of both neighbor and enemy. Many of these same threats are made in Deuteronomy. Here God promises blessing if his word is obeyed and curse if disobeyed.

"And if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth." (Deut. 28:1)

"But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you." (Deut. 28:15)

The author of Deuteronomy then enumerates the specific misfortunes resulting from disobedience. Some bear a striking resemblance to those enumerated in Lamentations.

1. a. "He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him; he shall be the head, and you shall be the tail." (Deut. 28:44)
- b. "Her foes have become the head..." (Lam. 1:5)
2. a. "and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness..." (Deut. 28:29)
- b. "They wandered, blind, through the streets,  
so defiled with blood  
that none could touch  
their garments." (Lam. 4:14)

3. a. "The Lord will bring you, and your king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known; and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone." (Deut. 28:36)
- . "And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you; and you shall be plucked off the land which you are entering to take possession of it. And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no ease, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot; but the Lord will give you there a trembling heart, and failing eyes, and languishing soul; your life shall hang in doubt before you; night and day you shall be in dread, and have no assurance of your life." (Deut. 28:63-66)
- b. "Jerusalem has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress." (Lam. 1:3)
- "The Lord himself has scattered them, he will regard them no more." (Lam. 4:16)
4. a. "Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and fail with longing for them all the day; and it shall not be in the power of your hand to prevent it." (Deut. 28:32)
- b. "...her children have gone away, captives before the foe." (Lam. 1:5)
- "...and behold my suffering; my maidens and my young men have gone into captivity." (Lam. 1:17)
5. a. "Therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in

hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and in want of all things; and he will put a yoke of iron upon your neck, until he has destroyed you." (Deut. 28:48)

- b. "We must pay for the water we drink, the wood we get must be bought. With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary, we are given no rest." (Lam. 5:4-5)

- 6. a. "They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout your land; and they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the Lord your God has given you." (Deut. 28:52)

- b. "...he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation... He has walled me about so that I cannot escape..." (Lam. 3:5,7)

"Her gates have sunk into the ground;  
he has ruined and broken her bars..." (Lam. 1:9)

"The Lord gave full vent to his wrath,  
he poured out his hot anger;  
and he kindled a fire in Zion,  
which consumed its foundations.

"The kings of the earth did not believe,  
or any of the inhabitants of the world,  
that the foe or enemy could enter  
the gates of Jerusalem." (Lam. 4:11-12)

- 7. a. "And you shall eat the offspring of your own body, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you." (Deut. 28:53)

"The most tender and delicately bred woman among you, who would not venture to set



the sole of her feet upon the ground  
because she is so delicate and tender,  
will grudge to the husband of her bosom,  
to her son and to her daughter, her  
afterbirth that comes out from between  
her feet and her children whom she bears,  
because she will eat them secretly, for  
want of all things, in the siege and in  
the distress with which your enemy shall  
distress you in your towns." (Deut. 28:56-57)

- b. "The hands of compassionate women  
have boiled their own children;  
they became their food  
in the destruction of the daughter  
of my people." (Lam. 4:10)
8. a. "And you shall become a horror, a proverb,  
and a byword, among all the peoples where  
the Lord will lead you away." (Deut. 28:37)
- b. "All who pass along the way  
clap their hands at you;  
they hiss and wag their heads  
at the daughter of Jerusalem;  
'Is this the city which was called  
the perfection of beauty,  
the joy of all the earth.'  
All your enemies  
rail against you;  
they hiss, they gnash their teeth,  
they cry: 'We have destroyed her!  
Ah, this is the day we longed for;  
now we have it; we see it!'" (Lam. 2:15-16)

Examples could be multiplied, but the connection between the  
threatened punishment in Deuteronomy and the accomplished  
punishment in Lamentations is apparent.<sup>29</sup> There exists a  
definite thematic link between the two books.

The basic thematic assumptions of Lamentations link  
it with a specific phase in the history of religious thought.  
The social focus of the book and its religious theodicy  
connect it with Deuteronomy. The same mind who found so  
satisfying Deuteronomy's theodicy of reward and punishment

received the consolation of Lamentations. He knew what God required of men. He recognized human disobedience. He believed that his Lord punished sin with the disaster he described. The poet of Lamentations and the author of Deuteronomy, especially chapter twenty-eight, shared social and religious views.<sup>30</sup> Whenever the Deuteronomic explanation of reality existed, or wherever it persisted, the poet of Lamentations might have worked.<sup>31</sup> The book cannot be identified with any single temporal calamity. The conclusions derived from examinations of its vividness, genre, and stylistic techniques prove that any skillful artist could have composed it at any time during the biblical and post-biblical periods. The only clues for dating Lamentations emerge from its identification with other biblical material with similar social, religious, and lexicographic foundations. In this case, the connection finds most dramatic expression in Deuteronomy<sup>32</sup> and other late additions to the Hebrew canon. One conclusion emerges. Some artist, at a late, post-exilic date, composed a lament, in the Deuteronomic mode of religious thought, mourning the destruction of the cult and ruling classes of his city.

### CHAPTER THREE

The purpose for which the poet wrote Lamentations remains a mystery. Eissfeldt proposes that he might have written it after 538 "for a festival held as a memorial to the fall of Jerusalem"<sup>1</sup> but does not elaborate. This conjecture, however, is worth discussing. Could there have existed during the Second Temple period a festival on which the destruction of the cult and aristocracy were lamented? The existence of this ceremony and a description of its major features is, of course, pure conjecture. Nevertheless, the possibility is supported by one fact. There was a book called Lamentations and it was used for something. Rabbinic Judaism used the book for a public ceremony of mourning after the fall of the Second Temple. Could the book have served a similar purpose at a cultic convocation in the days of the Second Temple? The occasion may have been a ritual reenactment of the fall of the First Temple as well as a mere memorial. By acting out this horrendous event, the priest, and vicariously the entire people, accepted upon themselves the "original sin," punishment, repentance, and restoration. By doing so, they cleansed themselves of any guilt and so averted a repetition of the ancient punishment. During the early Second Temple period, the whole festival of the atonement ritual of the ninth of Ab focused on the Temple.

Raphael Patai has written that the Temple was more than a mere locus for priestly pomp.<sup>2</sup> The Temple was seen

as the center of the universe; its foundations stood over the primeval abyss, Tehon. It was located on the highest earthly peak and the ritual performed there had a direct influence on the entire natural universe.<sup>3</sup>

"Moreover, the Temple symbolically represented the entire universe, and each and every rite performed in it affected that part or aspect of nature of which the rite itself was reminiscent. In fact the function of the Temple was of such basic importance that the very existence of the entire world depended on it. According to the Talmud, the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) resulted in the gravest disturbances in the natural order, and thereafter the fertility of Palestine was reduced to a mere fraction of its former riches..."<sup>4</sup>

Hence, any action affecting the Temple affected the whole world; an atonement ritual performed in the Temple had its direct consequence in the natural order. If such beliefs were held, a destruction of the Temple, indeed, was a monstrous upset to nature. Any rite to avert a disaster similar to the one that befell the First Temple would be a necessary ritual on the religious agenda of the Second Temple.

The contents of the rite would focus upon the responsible leadership in addition to the reenactment of the destruction and restoration. Patai describes the situation.

"...the functioning of the natural order was believed to have depended not solely on the regular and precise performance of the Temple ritual, but also on the conduct of the people, particularly on its leaders, outside of the sacred precincts. There existed, it was believed, an inner, a sympathetic connection between human conduct and the behavior of the

natural forces. Sin, i. e. improper or illicit human acts, brought about improper or illicit occurrences in nature---it was in this view that the original, basic sanctions that made for religious conformity were anchored. 5

This relationship between man and nature could explain the focus of imagery in Lamentations upon the priest, king, and prophet. These were the people whose actions most affected the natural order. Their heirs, the priests, would recite Lamentations during the Second Temple period. If the book were actually written at this time, the author would have ascribed the destruction to the class of people whose actions had cosmic significance, i. e., the leadership. By singling out a sinful leadership which no longer existed, he protected the current leadership from any real blame. The description of the actual sin was so general that the current priesthood could accept it "ritually" without exposing itself to any damaging identification with its guilty ancestors. At a seasonal occasion, the Second Temple priesthood would recite, possibly dramatically with verbal antiphonal parts and with music, the book known as Lamentations. On this occasion, they ritually reenacted the destruction and necessary restoration and, therefore, of the natural order. They would accept upon themselves a ritual sin, guilt, and repentance. By doing so they cleansed themselves of guilt, thereby averting a fresh disaster.

T. H. Gaster explored the likelihood that such a seasonal drama ever occurred. The result of his investiga-

tion provides a provocative, but highly speculative, theory based upon folklore analogies. It does, however, try to explain certain problems. If Lamentations were recited by a Second Temple priesthood, when might they have done it? Gaster provides a tentative answer. He also lends some substance to the notion of a seasonal, vicarious atonement ritual performed with some drama. His theory is complex, involving a number of elements. It is not the purpose of this paper to offer a critique of Gaster's theories and their problems. Some of his general conclusions may be useful in reconstructing a putative historical context for the use of the book of Lamentations. He posits the hypothesis of seasonal, dramatic rituals. It is this conclusion which is suggestive for Lamentations.

Gaster believes that seasonal religious ceremonies formed the basic nucleus of drama. He defines drama as a series of acts arranged in a specific pattern and manifesting a specific plot. These dramas corresponded to the seasonal life cycle and, thereby, to the life of an individual and community. Central is the belief that the human and cosmic lives are related intimately. As cosmic life waxed and waned, so did human life. Cosmic life finds expression in the seasons and manifestation in agriculture. Cosmic life was also not automatic. As the earth seemed to wither and die in one season, the renewal of earth in the next season was not guaranteed. The inter-

action of man, through the performance of some ritual, was required to assure the renewal of life. Life, then, was a series of periodic renewals. A regular program of activities was established which, performed periodically under communal sanction, furnished the renewal of life.

Gaster divides these ritual activities into two varieties. There are rites of Kenosis, emptying, which represent the eclipse of life and, on the other hand, rites of Plerosis, filling, which center about the renewal of life. Gaster finds four basic acts when combining the activities of Kenosis and Plerosis: (1) Rites of mortification which symbolize the state of suspended animation which ensues at the end of the year, when one lease of life has drawn to a close and the next is not yet assured. (2) Rites of purgation in which the community seeks to rid itself of all foul matter which might impair prosperity and threaten renewal. (3) Rites of invigoration whereby a community attempts, by its own efforts, to galvanize its moribund condition and to procure that new lease of life which is imperative for cosmic continuation. (4) Rites of jubilation which indicate human relief when the new year has begun and the continuation of life is assured. Each group of rites has its characteristic activities. Mortification has fasts and wailing; purgation includes the use of fire; invigoration might take the form of ritual combat while jubilation could involve feasting. Gaster offers an ideal model but claims



to find elements and aspects of each type and category in varieties of cultures, ancient and modern, including biblical societies. He offers the student of Lamentations not a definite answer but a possibility.

Ancient Israel might have known rites, occurring at seasonal times, embodying aspects of Kenosis and Plerosis. The possibility exists that the important seasonal rituals took place around the time of the autumnal New Year in association with agricultural harvest. The festival of the ninth of Ab, occurring during the mid-summer dry season, just before the Fall harvest and subsequent renewal, was a prelude to this seasonal ritual. The ninth of Ab involved fasting and lamentation, acts expressing anxiety and hope for success during Tishri. Such a ritual might even have occurred already during the First Temple period. The subsequent destruction of the Temple would lend new immediacy and reality to the importance of these rituals. If man wished to avoid a calamitous blow to the cosmos, he must celebrate this fast of Ab with special dedication. During the Second Temple period, the ninth of Ab, like many of the Israelite holy days, was invested with a historical importance which concealed its earlier seasonal, agricultural elements. The combined effect was to insure the continuation of the Temple and to guarantee the renewal of the natural order. The book of Lamentations was recited by the priesthood, possibly in some public, dramatic presentation. The effect, as Gaster would phrase it, was

to turn the presentation into a representation, to introduce an element of mimesis and to confer upon the participants the added and parallel role of actors, so that they were at one and the same time both protagonists of a direct experience and impersonators of characters other than themselves. In short, they reenacted, ritually, the destruction, accepted, ritually, the sin and the repentance, and expressed, in fact, a hope for restoration. Thereby, the priesthood averted further disaster and assured the continuation of the Temple and, hence, of the cosmos itself. The rite occurred during that midsummer period of anxiety in which the society is most vulnerable to the disruption of the natural order; once the Temple had been destroyed, its fate and continuance could easily be associated with that period of anxiety when disruption had once occurred and could occur again.

There is some suggestive biblical evidence that a ritual fast occurred during Ab at least as early as the late sixth century. The allusions come from Zechariah.

"In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev. Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men, to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to ask the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts and the prophets, 'Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done so for many years?'" (Zech. 7:1-3)

The fifth month is Ab counting from Nisan. Ab is the month during which the Temple was, traditionally, destroyed. Also, there is this reference.

"And the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of theseventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love truth and peace.'" (Zech. 8:18-19)

These quotations support the view that there was a time of mourning and fasting during Ab, at least as early as the late sixth century. It is possible to assume that Lamentations was written during the Second Temple period, perhaps for the fasting of the fifth month, by an author who linked it thematically with Deuteronomy. The book would have been recited, as a unified composition, at the traditional seasonal ritual. The performance was a vicarious reenactment, much like the modern mass. The recitation of Lamentations was assumed to have a prophylactic effect, insuring the continued existence of the Temple, the priesthood, and consequently of Israel and of the natural order itself.

## FOOTNOTES

## NOTES

## Introduction

1. The Ninth of Av commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples and any other national calamity which occurred on that day or one day earlier or later.
2. Ibn Ezra in the introduction to his commentary on Lamentations.

## Chapter One

1. <sup>2</sup>Septuagint, Introduction to Lamentations 1:1.
2. Targum Lamentations 1:1.
3. Rashi in his commentary on Lamentations 1:1.
4. Ibn Ezra in the introduction to his commentary on Lamentations.
5. Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations, translated by Dr. A. Cohen, (London, Soncino Press, 1939), p. 69.
6. S. R. Driver, An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. 463.
7. Ibid., pp. 463-464.
8. Robert H. Pfeiffer, Introduction to the Old Testament (New York and Evanston, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1948), pp. 720-723.
9. Otto Eissfeldt, The Old Testament: An Introduction (New York and Evanston, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), pp. 500-505.
10. Georg Fohrer, Introduction to the Old Testament (Nashville and New York, Abingdon Press, 1968), pp. 295-299.
11. Chapter two examines this descriptive quality of Lamentations in detail. Nowhere is the book self-revealing. At the most, its descriptions are merely good portraits of any ancient urban siege. Similar depictions exist in other ancient literatures. Hence, the similarity between Lamentations.

imagery and any specific historical event or person could be purely coincidental. Suffice it to say, at this point, that Ibn Ezra's observation should be regarded as a serious warning against drawing any hasty conclusions from the book's descriptions about the date of any of its events or the character of its author.

12. Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 14b-15a.
13. Raphael Patai, Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual (New York, KTAV Publishing House Inc., 1967), p. 172.
14. Ibid., p. 132.

## Chapter Two

1. Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations, op. cit., p. 69.
2. Ibn Ezra in the introduction to his commentary on Lamentations.
3. Rashi in his commentary on Lamentations 1:1.
4. Solomon Zeitlin, The Rise and Fall of the Judaeae State (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1968), Volume I, pp. 287-288.
5. S. R. Driver, op. cit., p. 456.
6. Robert Pfeiffer, op. cit., p. 720-723.
7. Otto Eissfeldt, op. cit., p. 503.
8. Georg Fohrer, op. cit., p. 298.
9. Norman K. Gottwald, Studies in the Book of Lamentations (Alec R. Allenson, Inc., Chicago, 1954), p. 46.
10. Bertil Albrektson, Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations (CWK Gleerup, Lund, 1963), p. 223.
11. Julian Morgenstern, "Jerusalem, 445 B. B.," Hebrew Union College Annual, XXVII (1956), p. 105.
12. Samuel Tobias Lachs, "The Date of Lamentations V," The Jewish Quarterly Review, LVII (July, 1966), p. 49.
13. Delbert Hillers, The Anchor Bible: Lamentations (Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, 1972), p. XVIII.

14. Ibid., pp. XXX-XXXII..
15. Ibid., pp. XXXII-XXXIII.
16. Ibid., p. XXXIV.
17. Ibid., p. XXXIII.
18. S. R. Driver, op. cit., pp. 463-464.
19. Ralph Marcus, "Alphabetic Acrostics in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods," Journal of Near Eastern Studies, VI (April, 1947), pp. 109-115.
20. Samuel Noah Kramer, "Lamentation over the Destruction of Nippur," Eretz-Israel, 9 (1969), p. 90.
21. Samuel Noah Kramer, translator, "Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur," Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 611-619.
22. Samuel Noah Kramer, Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1940).
23. Theodore H. Gaster, Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament (New York and Evanston, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), pp. 816-818.
24. We still might posit some indirect influence of one artist upon another. Could the existence of the Sumerian lament as an established literary genre have engendered a kind of continuing literary tradition in which the creative artist of a later age might well have chosen to express his own thoughts? The biblical artist may have created his own form but he need not have done so. As a man of letters, he may have been aware of the literary mode of the lament. The fact that he produced similar imagery could then be no more startling than the persistence of a few linguistic cliches.
25. The problem of parallel usage of vocabulary and form is one of great complexity. The reader must keep in mind several ideas. There is a difference between the utilization of a tradition and slavish copying. Ancient standards of literary aesthetics are not necessarily modern ones. The Roman poets and playwrights of the Republic owed much to their Greek forebearers. Total originality was not the virtue it is today. Creativity depended more upon

the manipulation of known forms and themes. In such a way, a Plautus, a Terrence, and a Horace were highly successful and creative. On the other hand, there is a question which renders the issue of influence and originality all but unsolvable. The possibility exists that the author of Lamentations was completely original as well as creative. Then, the alleged parallels derive from the coincidence of common experience. Such a potential, as unlikely as it may be, always remains a possibility. Unfortunately, there is no clear evidence which would completely define the two elements of creativity and originality as they exist in Lamentations.

26. Dt. 1:12; Dt. 7:17; Dt. 12:30; Dt. 18:21; Dt. 32:30; Ju. 20:3; 2K 6:15; Jer. 8:8; Ps. 73:11.

27. Isaiah 1:21:

אֵיךְ בִּיתְּךָ עָזַבְתָּ קִרְבְּךָ נִאֲמָר מִלֵּאֲתֵי מִשְׁכָּנִי  
בִּצְרָק יָשָׁן בֵּרַךְ וְצִתְּךָ מִצְחִים.

Jeremiah 48:17:

...אֵיךְ נִשְׁמַר מִלֵּא עַם מִקֵּץ תַּבְּאִירָה.

28. It occurs about sixteen times.

29. Scholars previously spent a great deal of time dating the two works on the degree of vivid descriptions which the books contained. This vividness argument assumed that anyone who writes such vivid pictures of disaster and suffering must surely have witnessed them. No one could depict such horrors so convincingly unless he saw them. Using this vividness argument, scholars attributed various chapters, if not the entire book, to poets who might have witnessed national disasters. Scholars searched the book meticulously for clues which might reveal the alluded historical event. Hence, the later chapters of Deuteronomy must have been written at a late time, possibly during the exile, because of the vivid descriptions of the alleged events of 586 B. C. E. and afterward. The modern scholar knows of those events because he possesses a description of them in Lamentations. This book is said to depict the calamity which befell Jerusalem. Since the pictures of destruction there are so vivid, the author surely must have been an eyewitness. Applying the vividness argument to Lamentations



attracts parts of Deuteronomy to that late date. Therefore, Deuteronomy 28 cannot contain the threats for which Lamentations is a fulfillment. On the contrary, the reverse is true. Deuteronomy 28 merely expresses in prose terms the theology implicit in Lamentations' poetry. The pentateuchal book, in fact, draws upon Lamentations for its vivid descriptions, if it does not rely, itself, on eyewitness accounts. The vividness argument precludes the assumption that Lamentations represents the fulfilment of Deuteronomy. The refutation of the vividness argument on pages 5-6 also applies here as well.

30. To say this much only locates the intellectual intentions of the book's original author. The further possibility that the poet had Deuteronomy 28, even verses like it, in the back of his mind remain only a conjecture.
31. The word "persisted" has some importance. Pseudepigraphy was common in the ancient world. It has been shown that a skillful poet had the resources to compose Lamentations purely from imagination.
32. Even this link, however, is literary, not necessarily temporal.

### Chapter Three:

1. Otto Eissfeldt, op. cit., pp. 503-504.
2. Raphael Patai, op. cit.
3. Ibid., p. 221.
4. Ibid., p. 221.
5. Ibid., p. 222.

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