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# IF JEREMIAH WROTE IT, IT MUST BE OK: ON THE ATTRIBUTION OF LAMENTATIONS TO JEREMIAH IN EARLY RABBINIC TEXTS<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Despite the absence of any formal attribution of the book of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible, the rabbis of the Talmudic period chose to perpetuate and reinforce this idea. The question explored is how this benefited them. Using Jorge Gracia's discussion of the "pseudo-historical author," the influence of the rabbinic assumption of Jeremiah's authorship of Lamentations on their exegesis of the book is explored. The rabbis were troubled by a number of theologically challenging verses and the claim of authorship opened the door to their use of the book of Jeremiah to explain away these difficulties.

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1 In 2004 I was fortunate to enjoy a significant amount of time with Professor and Mrs. Riekert in Skukuza during the *Rencontre Assyriologique* and then while lecturing in Bloemfontein. Their overwhelming kindness and hospitality has not been forgotten and it is an honour to offer this article to Professor Riekert as a belated token of my gratitude and esteem.

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All biblical citations unless otherwise indicated are quoted from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (1999). All citations of the *Babylonian Talmud* (indicated with *B.*) are quoted from Epstein (1935-1952). All citations from *Midrash Rabbah* (*Ex. Rab.*; *Lam. Rab.*; *Songs Rab.*, etc.) are from Freedman & Simon (1939). In all cases the citations have been checked against the original and have been corrected or adjusted for clarity and accuracy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Most ancient translations of the Bible explicitly attribute the book of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah. The Hebrew Bible leaves the book's author anonymous, yet the rabbis of the Talmudic period for whom the Hebrew texts were sacred scripture adopted and perpetuated the ubiquitous assumption of Jeremiah's authorship. Delbert Hillers (1992:10-11) has appropriately commented:

That the prophet Jeremiah wrote Lamentations is so firmly rooted in traditions about the Bible, in western literature, and even in art that even after the ascription to Jeremiah was challenged (first in 1712, by H. von der Hardt), discussion of the book's authorship has tended to take the form of listing reasons why Jeremiah could not have written the book, or why he must have, as though the tradition were unanimous.<sup>2</sup>

Jeremiah's authorship is taken for granted. As a result, the question of why the Jewish sages of antiquity actively perpetuated and used this tradition must be asked. How did this serve their agenda?

For the rabbis, this was not simply a case of identifying the author of a biblical book, although, according to Hillers (1992:12) this was a common practice which fulfilled "the natural desire in the early days of biblical interpretation ..." Lamentations was an accepted part of the Hebrew canon and reasserting the claims of Jeremiah's authorship would have unlikely given it additional authority. However, the attribution helped solve a theological problem, on the one hand, and created a clearly defined framework for the interpretation of Lamentations, on the other. Despite Hillers' assertion, the issue was not about filling a need to establish clear authorship. Anthony Grafton (1990:6) has argued convincingly that "In some periods and traditions writers have ascribed religious texts to divine or semidivine figures not because they were preoccupied with matters of authorship but because they wished to stress the continuity of their writings with an original tradition or an orthodox doctrine."<sup>3</sup> While the rabbis were not the authors of Lamentations, in assigning pseudo-historical authorship

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- 2 Hillers makes clear that this situation was not unanimous. The Hebrew Bible is the key example of leaving the author anonymous. The rabbis could also have left the text anonymous, it may well have been the intent of the actual historical author. If Jeremiah's authorship was assumed from the very beginning, it is rather difficult to explain why the text is anonymous and why Lamentations is never found in proximity to Jeremiah in the Hebrew canon (Hillers 1992:8-13). While it might be suggested that Lamentations included in the Writings to place it among the Five Scrolls, at least in some ancient lists the Hagiographa are organized chronologically and Lamentations is placed directly before Daniel and Esther rather than among the Scrolls (e.g., *B. B. Bat.* 14b-15a).
- 3 Grafton's view stands in contrast to the general trend in contemporary biblical studies which is preoccupied with questions of authorship, particularly with regard to

to Jeremiah they stressed the continuity of Lamentations with the “orthodox” understanding of theodicy found in the book of Jeremiah.

While the rabbis may have believed that Jeremiah was the historical author of Lamentations, he is better described as what philosopher Jorge Gracia calls the pseudo-historical author:

The pseudo-historical author is a mental construct that is believed by an audience — or constructed by someone (sometimes the historical author) to lead an audience to believe it — to be the historical author. The pseudo-historical author is a construct of an interpreter who wishes to know more about a text or wishes to pass judgment upon its author.

Texts of literary, philosophical, religious, or scientific works, for example, elicit pseudo-historical authors. The reason is that they are subjects of interpretations or present characteristics of originality and value that lead to the development of propriety interests in them (2002:180).

The argument here is that the rabbis benefited from interpreting Lamentations as if Jeremiah had written it. As an anonymous text in the canon, it may well have raised questions for the rabbis. In general, the rabbis appreciated that Lamentations supported their understanding of theodicy — God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked according to the rules of the covenant handed down at Sinai. However, a number of verses appeared both cynical and rebellious to them. In promoting Jeremiah’s authorship the rabbis created a dynamic in which his credibility and piety as a prophet in Judah was used to vouch for Lamentation’s theological acceptability. Likewise, it established a framework for rabbinic exegesis of the text and assured that it was read within specific parameters: (1) Jeremiah and Lamentations, written by the same author, shared a common theology;<sup>4</sup> and (2) since Jeremiah was a prophet, Lamentations, like the Book of Jeremiah, was prophetic and foreshadowed future events (e.g., the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.). Because of the assumed relationship between these books, the rabbis could also mine 2 Chronicles 35-36 where Jeremiah appears for some of the historical data they needed to explain the context of particular passages in Lamentations.

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the assumption that the texts gain authority based on an assigned authorship. For an overview see Najman (2003:1-16).

4 Contemporary scholarship has largely rejected the possibility that Lamentations and Jeremiah were composed by the same author. Although the book of Lamentations was once dated by Biblicalists to the Maccabean period, this dating has been generally rejected in favour of a time closer to the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E. and for composition, perhaps, by a circle of the Temple singers. For an overview of the debate, see Miller (2002:10-12).

## 2. OF BIBLICAL BOOKS AND BIBLICAL AUTHORS

Many of the Hebrew Bible's books include apparent authorship claims: *The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's* (Cant.1:2); *A Song. A Psalm of David* (Ps. 108:1); *The words of Koheleth Son of David* (Ecc. 1:1); *The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri* (Hos. 1:1). Lamentations, however, is anonymous, found in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the Holy Writings, sometimes following the Song of Songs and preceding Daniel. On other occasions it is grouped with the four scrolls used for specific liturgical purposes (Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs). Never is the volume found anywhere in proximity to the book of Jeremiah, which appears in the second section of the Hebrew Bible, among the Prophetic books. This is not true of other Bibles. In the Septuagint Lamentations begins with an explicit statement of authorship: "And it happened, after Israel was taken captive and Ierousalem was laid waste, Ieremias sat weeping and gave this lament over Ierousalem and said: How the city sat alone. She who was full of peoples!" (trans. Gentry 2007:935). The Peshitta likewise introduces Jeremiah as the author using a heading reading: "The Book of Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet." The Vulgate Lamentations opens:

And it happened that, after Israel was driven into captivity, and Jerusalem was deserted, the prophet Jeremiah sat weeping, and he wailed this lamentation in Jerusalem. And sighing with a bitter soul, and mourning, he said: O how a city once filled with people now sits alone! The Governess of the Gentiles has become like a widow. The Prince of the provinces has been placed under tribute.

The attribution is reinforced by the location of Lamentations within the various Bibles. In the Septuagint, it is found following the book of Jeremiah, as if an appendix to it, along with the apocryphal *Book of Baruch* [Jeremiah's personal scribe] and the *Letter of Jeremiah*. It is similarly located in the Peshitta and in the Vulgate.

The Hebrew Bible is unique, neither claiming Jeremiah's authorship nor formally arranging the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations in proximity. Despite this, the Jewish exegetical tradition which relies on the Hebrew Bible makes the same assumption of authorship.<sup>5</sup> The Aramaic Targum of Lamentations, a rabbinic composition dating from between the late fifth and the early seventh centuries<sup>6</sup> declares Jeremiah the author:

5 For an overview of Jewish interpretation of Lamentations through the ages see Alexander (2007:51-70). For more thorough discussion of the Targum to Lamentations, *Lamentations Rabbah*, and the medieval *kinot* see, Linafelt (2000).

6 There is no clear consensus on this dating. Philip Alexander dates it to the late fifth or early sixth century (2007:89-90). For discussion of a seventh century date see Brady (1999:5-29).

Jeremiah the Prophet and High Priest<sup>7</sup> told how it was decreed that Jerusalem and her people should be punished with banishment and that they should be mourned with 'ekah.<sup>8</sup> Just as when Adam and Eve were punished and expelled from the Garden of Eden and the Master of the Universe mourned them with 'eka. (trans. Brady 2003:155).

This authorship claim is found throughout rabbinic literature and builds on 2 Chr. 35:25 which grounds the tradition in Scripture: "Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah which all the singers, male and female, recited in their laments for Josiah, as is done to this day; they became customary in Israel and were incorporated into the laments [or Lamentations]." The rabbinic tradition reinforced the attribution in several different ways. First it declared Jeremiah the author explicitly. In listing the authors of biblical books, *B. Baba Batra* 15a records: "Jeremiah wrote the book which bears his name, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations."<sup>9</sup> According to a tradition preserved in *B. Moed Qatan* 26a, the book that Jeremiah composed and the king destroyed in Jeremiah 36 was, in fact, Lamentations. According to the talmudic teaching, a bystander should rent his garment as a sign of mourning if he witnesses the burning of a scroll of Scripture. The tradents support this rule with a discussion of the burning of Jeremiah's scroll in ch. 36:

What is the [Scriptural] source for this [rule]? — What is written: And it came to pass when Jehudi had read three or four columns that he cut it with a penknife and cast it into the fire that was in the brazier. [Jer. 36:23] What is the point of saying '[had read] three or four columns'? — They told [King] Jehoiakim that Jeremiah had written a book of Lamentations, [and] he said to them: What is written there? [They quoted] 'How doth the city sit solitary'. [Lam. 1:1] — [The King] replied: I am the King....[They recited several more verses which upset the King]... Forthwith he [began to] cut out all the names of God mentioned therein and burnt them in the fire; hence it is written [in the report there]: Yet

- 7 This appears to be the only place in rabbinic exegetical literature where Jeremiah is described as a High Priest, although he is most clearly from priestly lineage. The assertion reappears in the middle ages (e.g., David Kimhi to Jer. 1:1). For discussion see Alexander (2007:109).
- 8 'Ekah (How) is the first word of Lam. 1:1 and is the Hebrew title of the book.
- 9 Jeremiah as the author of Kings does not play a significant role in rabbinic discussion. At least in the rabbinic mind, as a late prophet who had witnessed the fall of the kingdom assigning the text to Jeremiah was certainly reasonable. With regard to Kings, the attribution may fit Hiller's assertion concerning the need to establish authorship better than the example of Lamentations. It is useful to note that modern Biblicalists argue for a common theology in Deuteronomy, Kings, Jeremiah, and other prophetic books. See, for example, Gowan (1998:98-117). This common theology is essential for understanding the attempts in rabbinic literature to make Lamentations fit this mold.

they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the King, nor any of his servants that heard all these words, [Jer. 36:24] which implies that the [bystanders] should have rent [their clothes].

The tradition is paralleled in *Lam. Rab.* 3:1 which locates the composition of Lamentations in the book of Jeremiah. For the rabbis, the book of Jeremiah provided the historical details which explained how and when the book of Lamentations was recorded. Baruch ben Neriah the scribe wrote down the material “from the mouth of Jeremiah,” and both the burned scroll and its replacement contained Lamentations:

R. Hama b. Hanina opened his discourse with the text, ‘Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah; who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and there were added besides unto them many like words’ (Jer. 36:32). There was no necessity for the word ‘like’; so what is the purpose of its addition? R. Kahana said: ‘And there were added besides unto them many like words’: ‘words’ refers to the first, second, and fourth chapters of Lamentations, ‘many’ to the fifth chapter, ‘like’ to the third chapter which consists of a series of three verses ...

In addition to such explicit declarations of authorship, the talmud and midrashic volumes introduce a citation from Lamentations with the formula “Jeremiah said” more than fifty times (e.g., *Songs Rab.* 3:6). In multiple places the rabbinic corpus contains reference to Jeremiah lamenting Jerusalem and the people of Israel with verses from Lamentations (e.g., *Lam. Rab.* Proems 18 and 23, 1:51, 2:23, and *B. Yoma* 38b). Nowhere in rabbinic literature is the attribution challenged. Jeremiah’s role as pseudo-historical author was secured by its exegetical usefulness: “The pseudo-historical author does not create anything and is not the cause of a text; he functions rather as one of the causes of the understanding an audience derives from a text insofar as he regulates and influences the understanding an audience derives from it” (Gracia 2002:170).

In order to understand rabbinic readings of Lamentations, a character sketch of the Jeremiah is necessary. Who was the Jeremiah the rabbis understood composed Lamentations?

### 3. THE RABBIS’ JEREMIAH

Jewish exegesis of Lamentations is directly related to rabbinic perception of Jeremiah and it is refracted through the lens of their descriptions of the cha-

racter and personality of the assumed author.<sup>10</sup> Just as the rabbinic attribution of the book of Job to Moses (*B. Bab. Bat.* 14b) helped to soften and qualify its apparent theological rebelliousness, the attribution here helped to qualify the book of Lamentations.<sup>11</sup>

According to rabbinic tradition Jeremiah was a second Moses. *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* (PRK, c. 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE) 13:6 records:

R. Judah bar R. Simon began his discourse with the verse *I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee* (Deut. 18:18). But a little farther on, Scripture says, “And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses” (Deut. 34:10), even though the first verse says *a prophet ... like unto thee*. The point, however, is that there will be, God promised, “a prophet like unto thee” in the uttering of reproofs. As a matter of fact, you find that much of what is written of the one, Moses, is written of the other, Jeremiah: the one prophesied forty years, and the other prophesied forty years; the one prophesied concerning Judah and Israel, and the other prophesied concerning Judah and Israel; the one — people of his own tribe rose against him, and the other — people of his own tribe rose against him; the one was cast into a river and the other was cast into a pit; the one was saved by a maid-servant, the other was saved by a manservant; finally, the one came with words of reproof, and the other came with words of reproof (Braude & Kapstein 1975:256-257).

In equating Moses and Jeremiah the rabbis likewise equated the works attributed to them. Thus, for the rabbis, the theology expressed in Lamentations and Jeremiah must, at the very least, be compatible with, or better, the same as, that which underlies the Torah.<sup>12</sup> In describing the theology of *Lamentations Rabbah*, the most extensive rabbinic commentary on this material, Jacob Neusner (2005: 374) has noted,

Deuteronomy and Jeremiah spell out the covenantal theology that accounts for Israel's fate, both prospective, as in the closing remarks of Moses in Deut. 33-34, and at the present age, as in Jeremiah's theology of Israel's coming disaster.

That theology relies on the classical rabbinic view that following God's ways leads to reward and sin leads to punishment (Kraemer 1995; Neusner 2003:685-727).

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- 10 For a more extensive discussion of Jeremiah through rabbinic eyes see Tomes (1997:233-253).
  - 11 The rabbis were quite uncomfortable with the book of Job. The book strongly suggests that a righteous person can suffer at the hand of God without justification. To bring the book in line with the theology of reward and punishment as laid out in the Pentateuch, the rabbis accused Job of a variety of sins demonstrating that the suffering was actually a divine punishment. See Kalman (2006a; 2006b).
  - 12 See note 8 above.

The rabbis interpreted Lamentations to fit this theology. Galit Hasan-Rokem (2000:13) claims that “Because they sinned, they were exiled; because they were exiled Jeremiah … began to lament over them, *Eikha*” is the “motto” of *Lamentation Rabbah*’s poems.<sup>13</sup> In fact, this idea is reinforced in the vast majority of rabbinic exegesis of Lamentations. The rabbis understood that the key to properly interpreting Lamentations was to harmonize it with Moses’ Torah. To give this a basis in fact, they attributed it to an author who they had accepted was cast from Moses’ mould.

The identification of Jeremiah as a prophet encouraged rabbinic harmonizing and allowed the rabbis to read Lamentations as if it spoke concerning future events. The rabbis were most concerned about the recent destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of Rome, but also found references to the messianic era in Jeremiah’s words. In these two matters, the rabbinic corpus is consistent throughout. Neusner sees it in *Lamentations Rabbah* and Alexander finds it in the *Targum to Lamentations*:

Two axioms would have dominated his [the Targumist’s] approach to the text. The first would have been that the text was saying the same thing in all its various parts … This urge to harmonize would have been driven not only by his doctrine of Scripture but also by his belief that Lamentations was the work of a single author, Jeremiah …<sup>14</sup>

There is a second axiom that would have influenced how our Targumist read the biblical text: this was the need to universalize it and to apply it to the present … It would have seemed totally natural to him to find allusions in the text of Lamentations to the destruction of the second Temple as well as the first (after all, Jeremiah, its author, was a prophet) … (Alexander 2007:24).

In accepting Jeremiah’s authorship the rabbis found that they could frame a meaningful response to the calamities of their own time. Jeremiah did not speak of a horrific event *like* the one the rabbis were facing, but addressed the specific calamity which confronted them. Simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, they could do away with theological difficulties raised by Lamentations.

<sup>13</sup> For additional discussion of this “motto” see Cohen (1982:18-39) who notes that this refrain ends fourteen of *Lamentation Rabbah*’s thirty-six poems (26).

<sup>14</sup> Alexander does not take the issue of harmonizing quite far enough. Yes, all the parts of Lamentations need to be harmonized, but so did all the works of Jeremiah including Lamentations. The issue of whether the book of Lamentations is an anthology of texts or a consistent whole, the work of a single individual or a group of authors remains an issue for modern scholarship. See, for example, Renkema (1998:44-50).

## 4. THE THEOLOGY OF LAMENTATIONS

In the Hebrew Bible the Book of Lamentations includes five chapters consisting of five poetic texts. The first, second, and fourth are alphabetic acrostics, each line beginning with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet — *alef* through *taw*. The third piece is an alphabetic acrostic in which each letter is repeated for three lines before continuing with the subsequent letter. The final piece is not an alphabetic acrostic though some contemporary scholars have attempted to argue that its twenty-two stanzas should be understood as connecting it to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (e.g., Hillers 1992:24-27, 161; Renkema 1998:44-50). As its name implies, the book is a collection of dirges lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Yahweh, the focus of Israel's religio-national identity. Although not entirely consistent, the general theological message of the book builds on that of the Deuteronomist — God and Israel are bound by a covenant, wherein God rewards and punishes the nation on the basis of its observance or transgression of the divine law as revealed in the Torah given to her at Sinai. Although the issue of theodicy in Lamentations is somewhat more complex, the rabbis sought out those passages which explicitly and literally reinforced the classical position and worked to reinterpret those passages which did not.<sup>15</sup> The rabbis conceptualized the destruction of Jerusalem in light of this theological formulation as divine punishment for the people's transgressions. According to an early rabbinic teaching (*Lam. Rab.* 1:20), the arrangement of the material in alphabetic acrostics was intended as a reminder that Israel had committed every sin from *alef* to *taw*, from A to Z.

Why is the Book of Lamentations composed as an alphabetical acrostic? R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis suggest answers. R. Judah said: Because it is written, Yea, all Israel have transgressed Thy law (Dan. IX, 11), which is written [with all the letters] from alef to taw; therefore is this Book composed as an alphabetical acrostic, one corresponding to the other.<sup>16</sup>

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15 The complexity of Lamentation's theodicy is treated by Renkema (2003:410-428).

16 In a parallel text found in *Lam. Rab.* Proem 24 the letters of the alphabet personified are called before a divine tribunal to testify concerning the sins of the people of Israel. The patriarch Abraham serves in the role of advocate for the defense. The *Alef* was set to testify that the people had transgressed the first commandment according to Jewish tradition, "I am [Heb.=*Anochi*] the Lord your God." The *Bet* was set to testify that they had not observed the laws of the Torah which begins with the Hebrew word *Bereishit*. Abraham questioned the *Gimel* arguing that only the nation of Israel had observed the law of fringes [usually *Tzizit* but here *Gedilim*, see Deut. 22:12]. When the remaining letters of the alphabet saw how Abraham challenged the first three, they refused to testify against Israel.

Generally the biblical book sees the destruction as an appropriate act on the part of God and the punishment deserved by the people:

The Lord is in the right for I have disobeyed him ... See, O Lord, the distress I am in! My heart is in anguish, I know how wrong I was to disobey ... (Lam. 1:18-20).

Likewise, a redemptive note is frequently sounded, the destruction is not perceived as the end. Lamentations 4:22 declares: "Your iniquity, fair Zion, is expiated. He will exile you no longer ..."

In light of Jeremiah's prophetic role and of Lamentations' apparent perpetuation of Deuteronomy-like theology, later generations of exegetes turned to the text with the sense that it not only mourned the loss of the first Temple, but could help explain the communal calamities of later generations. Since Jeremiah was a prophet, Lamentations could be read as prophecy.

The sense of history evident in rabbinic readings of Lamentations relies heavily on the theological trope which resounds in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Kings.<sup>17</sup> Throughout history Jewish writers have seen all community calamity in light of it and Lamentations has been explored as a way of shedding light on whatever contemporary woe the community faced. This, in fact, was the most straightforward reading of Lamentations which resulted from claiming Jeremiah's authorship.

In *Lamentations Rabbah* 2:8, the rabbinic interpretation presents Lam. 2:4 as prophetic:

HE HATH BENT HIS BOW LIKE AN ENEMY [Lam. 2:4]: this alludes to Pharaoh, as it is stated, The enemy said (Ex. XV, 9). STANDING WITH HIS RIGHT HAND AS AN ADVERSARY (II, 4): this alludes to Haman, as it is said, An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman (Est. VII, 6). Another interpretation of HE HATH BENT HIS BOW LIKE AN ENEMY: this alludes to Esau, as it is written, Because the enemy hath said against you: Aha! (Ezek. XXXVI, 2).

The midrash, at least initially, directs the reader back into history comparing God's actions in destroying the Temple to the pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites. However, the text then directs the reader forward, following the Temple's destruction, discussing Haman who appears in the book of Esther, set in the Persian exile, and then Esau, whom the rabbis identify with Rome, evidencing

<sup>17</sup> Historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi comments concerning this issue more generally: "For the rabbis the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history, and they had learned their scriptures well" (1996:21).

the prophetic voice of Lamentations.<sup>18</sup> To the rabbinic mind, Lamentations which was composed by Jeremiah in the wake of the destruction of 586 BCE, foretold events of the mid-fourth century BCE and of the late first century CE.<sup>19</sup> In *Lam. Rab.* 3:2 the historical references are even more explicit:

HE HATH BUILDED AGAINST ME, AND ENCOMPASSED ME WITH  
GALL<sup>20</sup> (III, 5): this is Nebuchadnezzar of whom it is written, Thou art the  
head (reshah) of gold (Dan. II, 38). AND TRAVAIL: this is Nebuzaradan.  
Another interpretation: GALL alludes to Vespasian and TRAVAIL to Trajan.

In the first interpretation the rabbis attempted to historicize the allusions in Lam. 3:5 in the context of the destruction of the first Temple. Nebuzaradan was the captain of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's guard who burned the first Temple and carried off the treasures and the captives to Babylon (2 Kings 25; Jer. 39-41, 43, 52). By contrast, the second interpretation reads that text as prophecy concerning the destruction of the second Temple and the squelching of later Jewish rebellions against Rome. The Second Temple was destroyed in the early part of the reign of the Roman Emperor Vespasian by his son Titus who controlled the Roman troops in Syria and Israel. Trajan was responsible for ending rebellions by Jews in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Herr 2007:90; Schalit 2007:514). While accepting Jeremiah's authorship served the rabbis well in their efforts to read Lamentations as prophecy, it proved far more helpful in their efforts to come to terms with a number of verses which appeared theologically disturbing to them.

Lamentations includes a number of verses which, at least to the rabbis, seemed to undermine their covenantal theology. Although Lamentations generally confirms divine justice, it contains a number of cynical and rebellious verses. Lamentations 2:5 accuses God of acting as an enemy of Israel:

The Lord has acted like a foe, He has laid waste to Israel, Laid waste  
to all her citadels, Destroyed her strongholds. He has increased within  
Fair Judah mourning and moaning.

- 18 On the relationship between Esau and Rome in the rabbinic imagination see, *inter alia*, Aminoff (1981), Cohen (1967), and Freedman (1995).
- 19 For discussion of Haman see, *Lam. Rab.* 2:1, 2:8, 3:11, 3:13; 3:23, and 4:25. For discussion of Esau see *Lam. Rab.* Proem 2, proem 24, 2:8, 2:12, 2:13, 3:1, 5:1. References to Lamentations foreshadowing the activities of Esau/Edom/Rome appear elsewhere in rabbinic literature. See, for example, Ex. Rab. 27:1: "In reference to Esau it is written, *They have ravished the women in Zion* (Lam. V, 11)." Here it is important to note that Esau is singular, but the Lamentations verse is plural, indicating the symbolic nature of the use of Esau.
- 20 The Hebrew word *rosh* (gall/misery/bitterness) shares the same consonants [resh/alef/shin] as the Hebrew word for head, which sets up the word play that immediately follows.

In 2:20 the accusations are that much harsher. The narrator speaks to God as Jerusalem personified:

See, O Lord, and behold To whom you have done this! Alas, women eat their own fruit, Their new-born babes! Alas, priest and prophet are slain In the Sanctuary of the Lord! Prostrate in the streets lie Both young and old. My Maidens and youths Are fallen by the sword; You slew them on your day of wrath, *You slaughtered without pity* [emphasis added].

Finally Lamentations concludes in 5:20-22 with the harshest challenge: "Why have you forgotten us utterly, Foresaken us for all time?"

These challenges to divine justice which suggest that God acts without pity, abandons his people, and causes mothers to cannibalize their young, caused Jewish readers some concern.

## 5. THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS OF LAMENTATIONS: JEREMIAH

First and foremost, adopting Jeremiah as author meant that the rabbis could read the book of Lamentations in light of the book of Jeremiah. They assumed that the theological positions distilled from Lamentations should be consistent with that distilled from the book of Jeremiah and that because of a single author this theology should be consistent between both books. Jack Lundbom describes the theology of the book of Jeremiah as follows:

Behind all of Jeremiah's talk about sin and judgment lies a broken covenant. Jeremiah prayed that Yahweh on his part would not break the covenant (14:21); nevertheless it was broken and Israel bore the responsibility (2:20; 5:5; 11:10; etc.). Yahweh was innocent of any wrongdoing (2:5, 31). It is the people and the nation's leaders who no longer "know" Yahweh (2:8; 4:22; 9:2 — Eng 9:3; 9:5 — Eng 9:6; cf. Hos 4:1), where knowing Yahweh means "knowing his way" (5:4-5), "knowing his ordinances" (8:7), and doing justice to the poor and needy (22:16). When Jeremiah talks then about the knowledge of Yahweh, he is talking about compliance with covenant stipulations (1992:718).

In light of this description of Jeremiah, how should those cynical and rebellious passages in Lamentations be understood? How does knowing that a prophet like Moses composed Lamentations change how the reader understands these challenges to the deity and the allegations against him?

## 5.1 Lamentations 2:5

With regard to the first passage in question, the rabbis used a hyper-critical reading of the text to blunt the charge. That they were troubled by the verse is evidenced by the fact of the midrash itself. Had they not been concerned, the midrash would be irrelevant. *Lamentations Rabbah* 2:9 records:

THE LORD IS BECOME AS AN ENEMY (II, 5). R. Aibu said: They [the Israelites] did not go to the extreme of rebellion against the Attribute of Justice, and the Attribute of Justice did not go to the extreme in punishing them. They did not go to the extreme of rebellion against the Attribute of Justice, as it is written, 'And the people were as murmurers' (Num. XI, 1) — 'murmurers' is not written here but 'as murmurers'. 'The princes of Judah are like them that remove the landmark' (Hos. V, 10)-'remove' is not written here but 'like them that remove'. 'For Israel is like a stubborn heifer' (ib. IV, 16) — 'is a stubborn heifer' is not written here but 'is like a stubborn heifer'. Similarly the Attribute of Justice did not go to the extreme in punishing them, for it is written, THE LORD IS BECOME AS AN ENEMY- the Lord is become an enemy is not written here but AS AN ENEMY.

Clearly it would be sinful to declare God an enemy of Israel, but a close reading of the verse indicates that, at least according to R. Aibu, Jeremiah made no such accusation. God is like an enemy who destroys a city in war, but unlike a foreign army, God acts out of justice. Note that had Israel rebelled completely she would have been *completely* destroyed, but God acted mercifully and with justification in punishing Israel for its transgressions. As an enemy is no more than a simile to indicate the intensity of the destruction. In no way did Jeremiah call God the enemy of Israel. Further, a rabbinic teaching in the *Mekhilta* (*Shirata*) makes clear that it is the people's actions which caused God to act in this way:

But when the Israelites fail to do God's will He fights against them, as it is said: 'Therefore He was turned to be their enemy, Himself fought against them' (Isa. 63.10). And, what is more, they make the Merciful One cruel, as it is said: 'The Lord is become as an enemy' (Lam. 2.5) (Lauterbach 1933:V.2,41-42).<sup>21</sup>

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21 *Midrash Tanhuma Bahukotai* includes a similar statement: "Now I was called (in Exod. 34:6): A MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS GOD, SLOW TO ANGER, but through their sins I have become cruel and changed my nature, as stated (in Lam. 2:5): THE LORD HAS BECOME LIKE AN ENEMY (Townsend 1997:360).

## 5.2 Lamentations 2:20-22

In order to resolve the problems perceived with Lam. 2:20-22, the rabbis turned what appears to be a soliloquy into a dialogue. In doing so, they took words out of Jeremiah's mouth and placed them in the mouth of the Shechina (i.e., the mouth of God). Both the *Babylonian Talmud* and *Lamentations Rabbah* discuss a specific case of a mother eating her offspring. According to the former, the mother of Doeg ben Joseph was forced to eat him after the destruction of the Temple (*B. Yoma* 38b). According to the latter, the widow of Doeg ben Joseph was compelled to consume their son. In both cases, the parallel texts take what are general statements in the Bible and make them specific. In Lam. 2:20-22 Jeremiah and God are discussing this particular case:

Rabina raised an objection: The story of Doeg b. Joseph whom his father left to his mother when he was a young child: Every day his mother would measure him by handbreadths and would give his weight in gold to Heaven [She dedicated the gold to the service of God in the Temple]. And when the enemy prevailed, she slaughtered him and ate him, and concerning her Jeremiah lamented: Shall the women eat their fruit, their children that are handled in the hands? Whereupon the Holy Spirit replied: Shall the priest and the prophet be slain in the Sanctuary of the Lord? — See what happened to him! (*B. Yoma* 38b).<sup>22</sup>

Here the theology is perfectly consistent with Deuteronomistic and rabbinic theology. Although the widow was herself righteous, she was punished as part of a sinful community. In reading Lamentations in as straightforward a manner as possible, it would appear that in Lam. 2:20-22 there are in fact a series of two questions, asked by a single orator in sequence: (1) Why should women have to cannibalize their young, and, (2) why should the priests and prophets be killed in the sanctuary? In other words, why should the invasion of the Babylonians who were functioning as tools of divine punishment create this situation? However, the rabbis read the first question as belonging to Jeremiah and the second as God's reply; God answered Jeremiah's question with a question. The explanation of the communal suffering is that it resulted from the people of Israel having created circumstances in which God's loyal servants could be harmed and killed. According to the *Lamentations Rabbah* text, God's statement refers to the case of the death of Zechariah the son of Jehoiada. According to 2 Chr. 24, during the reign of J(eh)oash King of Judah (c. 835-801) the people began to leave the Temple of God to serve foreign deities. God sent prophets, just which ones is ambiguous, and His spirit came upon the priest Zechariah the son of Jehoiada who chastised the people. In response, they conspired and stoned him

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<sup>22</sup> Although the tale stands alone in the Talmud, in *Lamentations Rabbah* it is included among a series of martyrologies. For discussion of its significance see Hasan-Rokem (2000:119-120).

to death in the Temple courtyard. The rabbis thus attributed the destruction of the Temple and the suffering of the community to a series of cumulative transgressions by the community over centuries; Zechariah perished more than two hundred years before the Temple's destruction. The implication is that God had likewise acted mercifully for centuries. Over and over God showed mercy, but this time He reacted with justice, not mercy. Accordingly, the rabbinic texts set up a scenario in which Jeremiah's response to God's question is a description of the deity's actions rather than a barbed accusation of divine misdeeds. As a result of centuries of transgression during which He refrained from acting out of mercy, God punished the people causing the scenario in which "Maidens and youths are fallen by the sword" because this time God seemingly rightfully "slaughtered without pity."

### 5.3 Lamentations 5:20-22

The rabbis attempted to resolve the difficulties inherent in the last verses of Lamentations in two ways. In the first, they again adopted the idea that the text was a dialogue in which Jeremiah and God were partners in conversation. In the second, they relied on Jeremiah's special status *vis-à-vis* God as a prophet. With regard to the former solution, *Ex. Rab.* 31:10 preserves the following:

It is written, Refuse silver did men call them (Jer. VI, 30). When Israel were driven from Jerusalem, their enemies took them out in fetters, and the nations of the world remarked: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, has no desire for this people, for it says, "Refuse silver did men call them." Just as silver is first refined and then converted into a utensil, again refined and turned into a utensil, and so many times over, till it finally breaks in the hand and is no more fit for any purpose, so were Israel saying that there was no more hope of survival for them since God had rejected them, as it says, 'Refuse silver did men call them.'

When Jeremiah heard this, he came to God, saying: 'Lord of the Universe! Is it true that Thou hast rejected Thy children? as it says, Hast Thou utterly rejected Judah? Hath Thy soul loathed Zion? Why hast Thou smitten us, and there is no healing for us? (Jer. XIV, 19).

It can be compared to a man who was beating his wife.

Her best friend asked him: 'How long will you go on beating her? If your desire is to drive her out,' then keep on beating her till she dies; but if you do not wish her [to die], then why do you keep on beating her?

His reply was: 'I will not divorce my wife even if my entire palace becomes a ruin.'

This is what Jeremiah said to God: 'If Thy desire be to drive us out [of this world], then smite us till we die,' as it says, Thou canst not have utterly rejected us, and be exceeding wroth against us! (Lam. V, 22); but if this is

not [Thy desire], then ‘Why hast Thou smitten us, and there is no healing for us?’

God replied: ‘I will not banish Israel, even if I destroy My world,’ as it says, Thus saith the Lord: If heaven above can be measured... then will I also cast off all the seed of Israel, etc. (Jer. XXXI, 37).<sup>23</sup>

There can be little doubt that a text of this sort helped to reinforce the rabbinic assertion of Jeremiah’s authorship of Lamentations. After all, in this reconstructed narrative the words of the book of Jeremiah and of Lamentations flow interchangeably from Jeremiah’s mouth. Initially this allows for a harmonizing of sorts.

The text of Lamentations here raises some significant interpretive difficulties. The formulation *kī ’im* (But instead?) which begins verse 22 is rather ambiguous. Hillers suggests four possible readings: First, the two words are to be read as retaining their independent meaning — for if — and the second part of the verse is to be understood as consequent upon the first. The verse would then be translated as: “For if you have utterly rejected us, you have been extremely angry with us.” Hillers rejects this reading because the second part of the verse appears more a restatement of the first than a consequence of it. The second possibility is that *kī ’im* means “unless”. The passage would then be translated “Unless you have utterly rejected us, you have been extremely angry with us.” This he rejects for the passage does not follow the expected pattern wherein the first part of the statement is typically a condition which must be fulfilled for the situation described in the latter part of the verse to come to pass. Hillers’ third possibility is that the passage may be interrogative: “Or have you utterly rejected us? You have been extremely angry with us.” This is excluded as *kī ’im* is not used in this way elsewhere in the Bible. Hillers adopts the fourth possibility which translates *kī ’im* as adversative in relation to the previous verse: “Bring us back to you, O Lord, and we will return. Make our days as they were before. But instead you have completely rejected us; You have been very angry with us.”<sup>24</sup>

23 This midrash appears as well in *Tanhuma* (Warsaw) *Mishpatim* 11, and *Pesikta Rabboti* 31:3.

24 This summarizes Hillers (1992:160-161). Translation of verses follows him. Robert Gordis suggests a fifth reading of *kī ’im* as even if or although (p. 291). This leads to necessarily reading verses 20-22 as a single extended statement: “Why do you neglect us eternally, forsake us for so long? Turn us to yourself, O Lord, and we shall return; renew our days as of old, even though you had despised us greatly and were very angry with us” (1974:293). For Gordis’ discussion of Hillers readings see 1974:289-290. Most recently, Linafelt (2001:343) has suggested that *kī ’im* should be rendered in its “most natural sense of ‘for if ...,’ and to understand all of v. 22 as the protasis of a conditional sentence in which the apodosis is understood

This last reading, preferred by Hillers seems to accord with the rabbis primary reading of the verse — the troubling one. That is, the rabbis at first understood Jeremiah to be ending his prophecy with the declaration that God had rejected the people instead of giving them the opportunity to repent and correct the situation. In light of rabbinic theological commitments, such a reading of the text could not stand. To resolve this, the midrash presented here recasted what was apparently a declarative statement in Lam. 5:22 as an interrogative. The authority for this reading came from a parallel statement found in Jer. 14:19. There the prophet asks: “Have you utterly rejected Judah? Does your soul loathe Zion? Why did you strike us, and there is no healing for us?” The midrashic tradition understands the two clauses in 5:22 as being set in opposition — a group being completely rejected by God is incompatible with God being tremendously angry with the same group. According to Lam. Rab. 5:22,

R. Simeon b. Lakish said: If there is rejection there is no hope; but if there is anger there is hope, because whoever is angry may in the end be appeased.”<sup>25</sup>

Providing this is the understanding at play in the *Ex. Rab.* tradition, Jeremiah was in fact raising a question derived from the ambiguity of the situation. Jeremiah asked God to clarify the situation — Was the destruction of the Temple and the exile from Jerusalem an indicator that Israel had been rejected and the covenant broken or was it a sign of Divine anger and that repentance and appeasement would be the correct response? Jeremiah sought to understand how to counsel the community. Since in the book of Jeremiah the prophet asked for clarification; by placing the words of Lamentations into the same discourse, the rabbis made its final verses function as part of the same rhetoric of investigation. According to this reading, Jeremiah asked God to reveal the explanation of the community’s suffering and the remedy for it, rather than declaring that the time for redemption had passed.

However, for the rabbis, the issue was not only that Jeremiah could state that God had rejected Israel but that such a statement could come as a conclusion of his prophecy. Given the rabbis place as the inheritors of the biblical tradition and its covenant, they could not allow for a situation in which it appeared that a prophet declared the breakdown of the covenant. Jeremiah’s prophecy, in principle, could not actually end on this sour note.

*Pesikta de Rav Kahana* 13:14 (Braude & Kapstein 1975:264-265) preserves a debate between Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Johanan concerning the pattern

rather than stated.” This leaves the statement incomplete and ends Lamentations with the hope that the apodosis might somehow be different than is most likely.

25 A parallel version is preserved in *PRK* 17:2.

of biblical prophecy. The former insisted that all the biblical prophets began with words of rebuke but concluded with words of consolation, with the exception of Jeremiah who opened with words of reproof and ended similarly: "Thus shall Babylon sink, and shall not rise again" (Jer. 51:64).

Johanan disagreed arguing:

But Jeremiah also concludes with words of comfort, for since he keeps prophesying the Temple's destruction, you might suppose that he would conclude with the Temple's destruction. Not at all. Scripture brings his prophecy to a close with the verse "Thus far are the words of Jeremiah" (*ibid.*), so that he concludes with prophecy of the downfall of those who destroyed the Temple.

In principle, Johanan agreed that Jeremiah's final statement consisted of words of rebuke. Because they were directed against the Babylonians, from his perspective they functioned as words of consolation to Israel — a sort of biblical *schadenfreude*. But this did not satisfy Eleazar who noted that Isaiah was another exception to the rule in that he too ended his prophecy with words of rebuke: "Does not Isaiah, too, conclude with words of reproof, saying "They shall be an abhorring unto all flesh" (Isa. 66 :24)?" Again, Johanan argued that these words were directed to the gentile nations and were heard by Israel as words of consolation. In discussing the nature of Jeremiah's prophecy, the men eventually turned to the last verses of Lamentations, where, in 5:22, it appears that Jeremiah ended with words of reproof:

[Returning to Jeremiah's concluding prophecy], is it not a fact that he says therein "But Thou hast utterly rejected us" (Lam. 5: 22)? Yes, but directly after he says "Thou hast utterly rejected us," he goes on to say comfortingly, "Turn Thou us unto Thee" (Lam. 5: 21).

The formulation of the homily's conclusion is more ambiguous in the original.<sup>26</sup> However, the passage may be the earliest allusion to what later became the well established practice that when Lamentations was read as a part of the liturgy for the Jewish fast day of Tisha B'av (the Ninth of Av, commemorating the destruction of both Jerusalem Temples) that the reader and the congregation repeat verse 5:21 after completing 5:22 so that the public reading ends with words of consolation. The earliest reference to the formal public reading of Lamentations on the festival is found in *Soferim* (a minor tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, passages 14:2 and 18:5) although *Lam. Rab.* proem 17 and

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26 The Hebrew original is somewhat ambiguous and Braude has here taken some poetic license. A more literal translation might read:  
And the written verse: "But Thou has utterly rejected us" (Lam. 5:22).  
"Turn thou us unto thee" (Lam. 5:21) is [written/stated] instead of (Heb.=*tahat*) "Thou has utterly rejected us."

3:5 suggest that it was a common practice to read Lamentations as part of the ritual for the day (at least individually) already in the earlier rabbinic period.<sup>27</sup> In current practice (the exact source of which remains unclear) the reader of Lamentations chants the text through 5:20 in the melody reserved for the body of a liturgical reading of a scriptural scroll. The reader then chants 5:21-22 using this same melody rather than that typically used for the concluding verses of a liturgical scriptural reading. The congregation then recites 5:21 using the melody reserved for concluding and the reader follows chanting the verse with this same melody (Jacobson 2002:879). The result is that to the ears of the congregation, Lamentations sounds as if it ends with “Turn Thou us unto You” rather than with the verse which actually concludes the written text. The discussion in *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* may suggest that a similar practice was already in place when it was composed in the fourth century. Given limited literacy, the possibility that Johanan is relying on having heard the work rather than having read it must be considered. As such, for him the work ended with words of consolation. In this way, Jeremiah was not claiming that God had rejected the people outright but with his advocacy on behalf of the people. In this sense he declared that God in his anger had rejected the people, but pleaded on their behalf that God forgive them and take them back. In reversing the order of the verses, Jeremiah’s claim of rejection was blunted. Rather than his concluding that all was lost, his prophecy ended with the hope of divine forgiveness and redemption. Once again, Jeremiah’s status as author helped to reshape the understanding of Lamentations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The book of Lamentations, within the exegetical tradition, stands at a midpoint with the prophet — the point where God and Israel meet. Jeremiah’s work is that of mediator and Lamentations is a work of mediation. From the rabbinic perspective it served to remind Israel that her sins lead down the path of destruction at the hands of a just God; but it likewise sought to remind God that His justice must be tempered with mercy and that within the covenantal relationship atonement allows for redemption. The authority for the reversal of the final verses of the book in the liturgy and in the exegesis comes at least in part from the assumption that Jeremiah, as Israel’s advocate, would not have let the book end without the possibility of her redemption. This same assumption seems to underpin many of the hermeneutical moves the rabbis made to soften those cynical passages found elsewhere in Lamentations. However, for some rabbis of antiquity, these statements could have stood without needing

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27 Generally *Soferim* is dated no earlier than the eighth century; *Lamentations Rabbah* to the early fifth century (Strack & Stemberger 1996:228,286).

to be explained away or having their sharp edges rounded. Lamentations was composed by Jeremiah and he was a prophet of a unique sort.

According to the *Midrash on Psalms* 90:2, Jeremiah was one of four prophets, along with Habakkuk, David, and Moses, distinguished by their love of Israel, which justified their lashing out at God:

Jeremiah said: I prayed to the Lord (Jer. 32:16) and began by saying *Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee* (Jer. 12:1); I who am here today and tomorrow in the grave, should I plead with Thee? Of what avail? *Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee.*

Nevertheless, Jeremiah went on to chide, *Yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments; wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper?* (*ibid.*) (Braude 1959:V.2, 85-86).

As a result of the rabbinic presentation of Jeremiah, the reader should begin to see those troubling passages in Lamentations not as challenging divine justice but as aggressive pleading on the part of a committed advocate for sinful Israel. The dual-tone of Lamentations parallels that of the book of Jeremiah. As a prophet, Jeremiah must announce the word of God and chastise Israel. As communal leader, Jeremiah must act as Israel's advocate and fight the Divine prosecution — just as Moses had done.

According to *Mekhilta Pisha* 1, there are three types of prophets. One defends God and Israel; another defends God but not Israel, the third Israel but not God. Jeremiah was of the first type:

Jeremiah insisted upon both the honour due the Father and the honour due the son. For thus it is said, "We have transgressed and have rebelled; Thou hast not pardoned" (Lam. 3:42). Therefore his prophecy was doubled, as it is said: And there were added besides unto them many words." (Jer. 36:2). (Lauterbach 1933:V.1:8-9).

Since Jeremiah's purpose was to defend God before Israel and Israel before God, it was not necessary to blunt the particular statements. In perpetuating this perception of Jeremiah, the harsh statements he made in Lamentations had to remain harsh or their efficacy in defense of Israel would be blunted and Jeremiah's efforts weakened.

While the notion that Jeremiah authored Lamentations served those who wished to reinterpret individual passages, it also opened the door for those readers who preferred to let them stand. Jeremiah was a special kind of prophet and as a result these harsh words were appropriate and necessary, and God ultimately rewarded Jeremiah for them. God made clear that Jeremiah spoke the words of Lamentations and that they were all pious.

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