

## The Timeless, Unifying Rhetoric of Lamentations

BENJAMIN D. GIFFONE (UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH)

### ABSTRACT

*Certain poetic features of Lamentations contribute to an ongoing preservative/cohesive function in faith communities. In form and content the reader/audience is confronted with completeness—a nation's complete destruction, the complete range of human emotion—and with incompleteness—a fragmented people, broken institutions, unanswered theological questions.<sup>1</sup>*

### A INTRODUCTION

Some recent studies have explored the liturgical and rhetorical functions of the book of Lamentations in faith communities through the centuries. This essay suggests that certain poetic features of Lamentations contribute to this ongoing preservative/cohesive function in faith communities.

The first goal of this study is to demonstrate that the book of Lamentations, like the Hebrew communal laments and the Sumerian city laments, is chiefly concerned with the preservation and restoration of the scattered Judahite people. The second goal of this study is to describe certain poetic features of the book of Lamentations that contribute to this ongoing preservative/cohesive function in Jewish communities, even beyond the immediate aftermath of the Babylonian destruction and the early Persian-era restoration attempts.

Lamentations displays tension between completeness and incompleteness in both its form and its content. The utter decimation of the society is reflected in the complete and indiscriminate destruction of Judah's people and institutions, and in the incomplete and fragmented state of Judah's population. Throughout the book, this tension plays itself out in various ways, adopting the acrostic form to accentuate the complete/incomplete motif.

In form and content the reader/audience is confronted with completeness—a nation's complete destruction, the complete range of human emotion—and with incompleteness—a fragmented people, broken institutions, unanswered theological questions.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the author's unpublished master's thesis; See Benjamin D. Giffone, "From Time-Bound to Timeless: The Rhetoric of Lamentations and Its Appropriation," M.Th. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2012.

## B HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The present thesis rests on two broad historical premises: the fragmentation of Yahwistic communities in the Persian period, and a unifying rhetorical function of communal laments and city laments in Ancient Near Eastern culture.

### 1 Fragmentation

The historical consensus is that various Yahwistic communities emerged from 587 B.C.E. and came into conflict with one another during the Babylonian and Persian periods.<sup>2</sup> Ezra-Nehemiah’s accounts of the restoration efforts portray ongoing conflict between the returning *golah* (exile) community and the “people of the land.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Jewish communities in Egypt (Jer 42-44, 46) and the east (Dan 1-6, Esther, Tobit) developed different modes of religious expression apart from the rebuilt Jerusalem temple.<sup>4</sup>

The following three statements summarise the relevant background to a possible “unifying” function of Lamentations.

- **Yahwism was pluriform prior to 587 B.C.E.** Contrary to any monolatrous biblical ideal, YHWH was worshiped in several sacred locations and with varying degrees of syncretism, as demonstrated both by the biblical portrayals and the archaeological findings.
- **After 587 B.C.E., Yahwism became irretrievably fragmented.** The destruction of the temple and the scattering of Judah eliminated the possibility of complete centralisation and uniformity of Yahwistic wor-

<sup>2</sup> Standard treatments include: Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Jill Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, *The Quest For the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel* (ed. Brian B. Schmidt; Atlanta: SBL, 2007); Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah Under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005); Ephraim Stern, *Archaeology in the Land of the Bible: The Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Periods 732-332 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Hans Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah During the “Exilic” Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996); Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Age of Exile,” in *The Biblical World* (ed. John Barton; New York: Routledge, 2002), 416-439.

<sup>3</sup> The usage of the term שְׂאֵרִית (“remnant”/“leftover”)—analogous to גּוֹלָה (“exile”) and when referring to the communities of Judahites left in the land after 587 B.C.E.—is purely descriptive, chosen to avoid the theological associations with the English term “remnant.”

<sup>4</sup> Middlemas, *The Templeless Age*, 19-27; Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume I: Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 240-43.

ship. Strains of Yahwism developed separately in Babylon, Palestine and Egypt.

- **After 587 B.C.E., most<sup>5</sup> expressions of Yahwism that made their way into the Hebrew Bible were oriented toward restoration of land, people and temple.** These hopes were expressed in different ways (inclusion/exclusion of the nations, monarchic/hierocratic government). But preservation of the community appears to have been a major motivation behind the formation of the Hebrew Bible.

## 2 Unifying Function of Communal/City Laments

Communal laments (and city laments in particular) appear to have functioned in ancient societies as a way of maintaining community cohesion in the midst of crisis. Laments were not merely personal expressions of emotion, but socially and religiously sanctioned, controlled ways of expressing grief.<sup>6</sup> The performance of a lament fulfilled several important functions in a community. First, it contributed to social cohesion in the face of catastrophe.<sup>7</sup> Second, it was a way of elevating the voices of survivors before the world and before heaven.<sup>8</sup> Third, a lament performance provided some sense of completion of the tragic event—a way for individuals and communities to move forward after tragedy.<sup>9</sup>

Communal laments by their very nature concern the preservation of a group. The performer attempts to mobilise the deity and the broader society in

<sup>5</sup> Even Esther, which is not "return"-oriented, is about the preservation of the Jewish people in the Diaspora.

<sup>6</sup> This concept is not easily understood by modern Western readers, for whom the most authentic expressions of emotion involve spontaneity and individuality. See Gary A. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 1991), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mark E. Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (2 vols.; Potomac, Md.: Capital Decisions Ltd., 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Xuan Huong Thi Pham, *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 302; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Margaret W. Green, "The Uruk Lament," *JAOS* 104 (1984): 253; Nancy C. Lee, *Singers of Lamentations: Cities Under Siege, From Ur to Jerusalem to Sarajevo* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 22.

the interests of the community. The laments may also invoke blessing on new collective endeavours, such as the rebuilding of temples and/or cities.<sup>10</sup>

Dobbs-Allsopp, in a literary analysis of the city laments, identifies nine "major generic features" of these compositions.<sup>11</sup> Three of these features are of particular interest to this study: the description of the city's destruction, the personification of the city as a weeping goddess, and the restoration of the city and return of the gods.<sup>12</sup>

The descriptions of the cities found in the Sumerian city laments are greatly concerned with the completeness of the destruction. The tragedy extends to all the people, the whole society, in all aspects of life. The destruction decreed by the gods and carried out by foreign enemies is indiscriminate: everyone—from the priest and king down to the lowest slave, from the city dwellers to those on the rural outskirts, from those killed or starving in the city to those who are taken captive—suffers a common fate.<sup>13</sup>

The personification of the city as a weeping goddess is found in all the city laments except one.<sup>14</sup> Personification gives voice to the city; the patron goddess grieves over the loss of her temple and treasures, as well as the death, suffering and captivity of her people. As in *Lamentations*, the goddess's people are sometimes portrayed as her children.

Most of the Sumerian city laments exhibit consistent concern for the destruction and fragmentation of the city's population. Fragmentation involves the breakup of social, religious and family structures, indiscriminate destruction of all classes and groups of people, and the death, destitution, flight or captivity of the whole populace.

Furthermore, wherever these poems describe divine or royal restoration—whether anticipated or realised—the regathering of the people and the reconstitution of those social and familial structures are important components of that restoration.

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., Cohen, *Canonical Lamentations vol. 1*, 38-39; Frederick W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), 14-15, 92-94.

<sup>11</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 66-90.

<sup>13</sup> On descriptions of indiscriminate suffering in Sumerian city laments and *Lamentations*, see Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 13-15.

<sup>14</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 77.

### 3 Historical Context of Lamentations

Without making a definitive statement concerning single or diverse authorship, this study approaches the book as a carefully edited unity. I favour a date between the fall of Jerusalem and the Cyrus edict; however, given the continuing liturgical significance of the book even after the temple was rebuilt,<sup>15</sup> it is not impossible to imagine that part or all of Lamentations could have been composed during the rebuilding of the temple or after its completion.<sup>16</sup> The present contention rests only on the availability of the book of Lamentations in some form during the Persian period; none of the literary observations made here is dependent upon a precise dating of Lamentations during that period.

### C FORM AND MEANING: ACROSTIC ARTIFICE

It is well known that four of the five poems of Lamentations are alphabetic acrostics. The purpose of the acrostic form and its relevance to interpretation has been a subject of some debate, particularly in light of recent attention to the literary aspects of the book of Lamentations.<sup>17</sup>

The acrostic form is most likely intended to evoke the idea or sense of *completeness* through the use of the entire alphabet from א to ת.<sup>18</sup> This form, utilised so neatly and intentionally in Lam 1-4, provides a skeleton for interpreting the often-vague paratactic relationship<sup>19</sup> between poetic lines.<sup>20</sup>

The acrostic form has two significant implications for the study of Lamentations. First, the use of the entire alphabet *in its proper order* connotes

<sup>15</sup> Lamentations is one of the *Megillot*, the five "little books" that are associated with Jewish holy days. Lamentations is read on the Ninth of Av, which commemorates the destruction of the first and second temples. See Kathleen M. O'Connor, *NIB* 6:1011, 6:1072.

<sup>16</sup> To think about this another way: the Second Temple community did not discard this text even after the tragedy it describes was in some measure reversed; therefore, we cannot be certain that such a text—if it were composed during or after the rebuilding—would necessarily mention the reversal of the events of 587 B.C.E.

<sup>17</sup> For a summary of this work, see Benjamin D. Giffone, "A 'Perfect' Poem: The Use of the QATAL Verbal Form in the Biblical Acrostics," *HS* 51 (2010): 49-72.

<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the acrostics appear to exhibit a preference for the use of the *qatal* ("perfect") verbal form over the *yiqtol* ("imperfect") form; this is partly due to the limits of the acrostic artifice, and partly due to the perfective, completed connotation of the alphabetic acrostic form (Giffone, "A 'Perfect' Poem," 61). Since Hebrew is primarily a verb-subject-object (VSO) language, the acrostic's predetermination of the initial letter of poetic line relegates a verse-initial *yiqtol* form to the א, ו, י and ת lines, whereas the *qatal* may occur at the beginning of any line in the acrostic.

<sup>19</sup> Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Giffone, "A 'Perfect' Poem," 61.

completeness—the complete devastation of Judah and the fullness of anguish. Second, the use of the rigid form accentuates the points at which the poetry resists or breaks the requirements of the form.

## 1 Lamentations 1

Lamentations 1 begins Zion's protest against abuse at the hands of YHWH, her husband.<sup>21</sup> This idea is in line with the work of Linafelt,<sup>22</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp,<sup>23</sup> Mandolfo<sup>24</sup> and others—but utilises a discourse-analytical approach<sup>25</sup> based on the acrostic as a macrosyntactic structure, not unlike O'Connor's approach in *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*.<sup>26</sup>

Zion's eagerness to appeal her abused status breaks across the macrosyntactic constraints of Lam 1. The rigid acrostic form—22 verses of three lines each (excepting the addition in 1:7b)—points to a natural division in the poem: between vv. 11 and 12.

Verses 1-11 are spoken by a third-person omniscient voice concerning Zion, and vv. 12-22 are mostly spoken by Zion to YHWH and others. But Zion twice "bursts out" against YHWH with the accusatory ראה (1:9c) and ראה והביטה (1:11c). One might imagine the acrostic as creating a poetic space for a courtroom-style testimony: Zion's turn to accuse as the pathetic victim *should* arrive at v. 20—the ר line is the proper place for ראה והביטה—but she cannot restrain herself and speaks out of turn.<sup>27</sup>

The acrostic form accentuates the dialogue between the two voices in Lam 1. The voices imbalance the two halves of the poem created by the neat acrostic artifice.

<sup>21</sup> Some of this analysis was presented previously by Benjamin D. Giffone, "How Lonely Sits the Text: Lamentations 1-2 and Evangelical Appropriation of Postmodern Biblical Studies" (paper presented at the Eastern regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 4 March 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "R(az/ais)ing Zion in Lamentations 2," in *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J.J.M. Roberts* (ed. B. F. Batto and K. L. Roberts; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 21-68; Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition and Theology in the Book of Lamentations," *JSOT* 74 (1997): 29-60.

<sup>24</sup> Carleen Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Following generally the approach of Tania Notarius, "Poetic Discourse and the Problem of Verbal Tenses in the Oracles of Balaam," *HS* 49 (2008): 55-86.

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Giffone, "How Lonely Sits the Text," 12.

Lam 1 <sup>28</sup>		Speaker	Addressee
1-8	...		
9	Her uncleanliness is in her skirts; she did not remember her end. And so she goes down wonderfully! She has no comforter.	Observer	General
	" <b>Look</b> , YHWH, at my affliction, for the enemy has become great!"	Daughter Zion!	YHWH
10	...		
11	All her people groan, searching for bread; They give their treasures for food to bring back the soul.	Observer	General
	" <b>Look</b> , YHWH, and <b>see</b> that I am despised!"		YHWH
12-16	12 "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by on the road? <b>Look</b> and <b>see</b> whether there is any sorrow like my sorrow..."	Daughter Zion!	Passersby
17	...	Observer	General
18-22	...		Peoples
	20 " <b>Look</b> , YHWH, for I am in distress..."	Daughter Zion!	YHWH
	...		

The idea of the ך line as the "proper" moment for the accusation is supported by the repetition of ראה והביטה in 2:20. Of course, it could be argued that these repetitions are simply the result of the fact that ראה is by far the most frequently-used word beginning with ך in the Hebrew Bible; indeed, various conjugations of ראה occur as thirteen out of twenty-two "key words"<sup>29</sup> in ך lines of the biblical acrostics. But the use of ראה (והביטה) in the twentieth line does not appear to violate the logical progression of either Lam 1 and 2; it does not seem that the poet(s) forced the poetry into the artifice in this regard. Rather, the "deviant" repetition of ראה in 1:9 and 1:11 (not to mention וראו in 1:12) accentuates the "proper" artificial usage in 1:20 and 2:20.

Nancy Lee proposes a similar way of thinking about the usage of the ע-פ-צ lines in Lamentations. She remarks, "This acrostic pattern is being used in a rhetorical battle, at some stage along the way, between two groups of

<sup>28</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>29</sup> The term *key word* refers to "the word in a poetic line that links the line to the acrostic. Most often the key word will be the first word, but this is not always the case" (Giffone, "A 'Perfect' Poem," 50n2).

singers with very different theological outlooks."<sup>30</sup> She observes that most of the acrostic psalms are "heavily invested in the idea of *'retributive justice,'*" making significant use of the צדק root.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, Lamentations offers a critique of YHWH's retributive justice, replacing צדיק in 1:18 with צעק ("cry out") in 2:18, צוד ("hunt") in 3:52 and 4:18, צמת ("annihilate") in 3:53, and צוף ("flow/engulf") in 3:54. This apparent perversion of justice is signalled prior to the צ line by the reversal of the ץ and פ lines in Lam 2-4:

Lamentations...presents dissident singers...who in their rebelling against a simplistic retributive understanding of events, I propose, employ the acrostic structure to *invert* that order of justice, with strategic inverting of the letters ץ and פ. It is probably no accident that these letters suggest in their root meaning what someone (or YHWH) "sees" and "speaks,"<sup>32</sup> and they precede the צ letter.... The צ word to follow that is most often used or emphasized in the psalmic acrostics, and used for YHWH and his *righteous* followers, is צדיק. Yet the acrostic with the first inversion of letters in Lam 2 leads not to the expected צדיק but to Jeremiah's appeal to the female singer to "cry out" (צעק) in lament, a virtual wordplay<sup>33</sup> with צדיק!<sup>34</sup>

Lee's explanation for the difference of alphabetical order within the book of Lamentations, while difficult to prove conclusively, is intriguing.<sup>35</sup>

The MT of 1:7 contains four poetic lines, the only such verse in the entire book. 1:7b is sometimes considered a later insertion (or as having been moved from 1:6a) based on its similarity to 1:10.<sup>36</sup> However, 1:7b may be an

<sup>30</sup> Lee, *Singers of Lamentations*, 165.

<sup>31</sup> Lee, *Singers of Lamentations*, 164 (emphasis original). Cognates of צדק occur thirty-seven times in the eight acrostic psalms, and as five out of fourteen צ key words.

<sup>32</sup> On the use of the names of the letters of the alphabet in the acrostics, see Giffone, "A 'Perfect' Poem," 54.

<sup>33</sup> This recalls the overt wordplay in Isa 5:7, in which משפה ("bloodshed") is substituted for משפט ("justice") and צעקה for צדקה.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy C. Lee, "Singers of Lamentations: (A)Scribing (De)Claiming Poets and Prophets," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (ed. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo; Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 44 (emphasis original).

<sup>35</sup> See Giffone, "A 'Perfect' Poem," 55-56. See also the discussion of the correction of the order of ץ and פ in Ps 34:16-18 ("A 'Perfect' Poem," 64); if Lee is correct, the presence of צעקו in Ps 34:18 would account for the "original" inversion of the preceding ץ and פ, which was then "corrected" by later scribes in such a way as makes these three lines obscure in their current received form.

<sup>36</sup> Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation* (trans. Charles Muenchow; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), emends the MT (110-112). Johan Renkema affirms 1:7b as original in *Lamentations* (trans. Brian Doyle; HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 128-29.



intentional creation of imbalance between the two halves of the poem. This has the effect of placing the statement of protest in 1:11c at the chiasmic centre of the poem—the thirty-fourth poetic line out of sixty-seven.<sup>37</sup> Of course, other text-critical factors should certainly be taken into account in any decision to emend the text in this manner. But the possibility that the rebellion against the rigid acrostic form is *intentional* should at least be considered.

Like certain other Hebrew acrostics, Lam 1 emphasises the idea of completeness with the repetition of the word כל (“all/each/every”). The acrostic poems of the Hebrew Bible as a set use כל much more frequently than do the non-acrostic psalms.<sup>38</sup> Lamentations 1 exhibits a strong preference for כל.<sup>39</sup>

## 2 Lamentations 2

The second poem of Lamentations is similar to the first in some ways, but alters the acrostic in certain ways. Each poem contains twenty-two verses of three lines each (1:7b notwithstanding). The two poems share key words at vv. 1 (איכה), 5 (היו/היה) and 20 (ראה). As with 1:11c, 2:11 appears to cross over the artificial middle of the poem created by the acrostic. Lam 2:1-10 describes YHWH’s barrage against his city and sanctuary from an omniscient third-person perspective. Lam 2:11-19 employs a first-person prophetic voice speaking to Daughter Zion directly. Lamentations 2:20-22 concludes the poem with Daughter Zion’s appeal to YHWH at the prophet’s urging:

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Ceresko makes a similar observation regarding the absence of a **י** line in Ps 34; see “The ABCs of Wisdom in Psalm XXXIV,” *VT* 35 (1985): 100-101.

<sup>38</sup> Giffone, “A ‘Perfect’ Poem,” 52n11.

<sup>39</sup> Occurrences of כל in poetry: Non-acrostic psalms, 1.25%; all Hebrew acrostics, 2.23%; Ps 145 (acrostic outlier), 8.25%; Lam 1, 3.33%; Lam total, 1.75%.

Lam 2		Speaker	Addressee	Agent
1-9	...			YHWH
10	The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground and are silent; They have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; The virgins of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.	Observer	General	People (Silence!)
11	My eyes are exhausted of tears; my stomach churns... ...because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city.			
12-19	12 They cry to their mothers, "Where is bread and wine?" ... 13 What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? ...	Prophet	Daughter Zion	People, Enemies, YHWH
20-22	20 "Look, YHWH, and see! With whom have you dealt thus?" ...	Daughter Zion	YHWH	YHWH

### 3 Lamentations 3

Lamentations 3 is nearly identical to the first two poems in length but distinguishes itself from Lam 1-2 by intensifying the acrostic form:<sup>40</sup> each of the sixty-six lines now follows the acrostic, with three  $\aleph$  lines followed by three  $\beth$  lines, et cetera. The heightened rigidity of the form draws even more attention to instances of "crossover" between stanzas.<sup>41</sup>

One example of crossover is found in 3:12-13. 3:10-12 is the  $\aleph$  stanza; but the bow-and-arrow metaphor crosses over into the  $\beth$  stanza:

<sup>40</sup> O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp observes, "The alphabetic acrostic and the *qinah* metre are at their most demanding in this chapter, and the chapter exhibits the greatest amount of syntactic and semantic enjambment across lines and even across stanzas" ("Tragedy, Tradition and Theology," 48).

	...
ד	3:11 He has turned aside my steps (דרכי) and torn me to pieces; he has made me desolate.
ד	3:12 He bent (זרך) his <b>bow</b> and set me as a target for his <b>arrow</b> ;
ה	3:13 He drove (הביא) into my kidneys the <b>arrows [lit. ‘sons’] of his quiver.</b>
ה	3:14 I have become (הייתי) sport for all peoples, their song all day long.
	...

A starker example is found in the ז and ה stanzas. After recounting his many afflictions at YHWH’s hand (3:1-20), the (every)man (גבר) turns to hopeful thoughts:

	...
ז	3:20 My soul certainly (זכור) remembers [my affliction] and is bowed down within me.
ז	3:21 But this (זאת) I revive in my heart, and therefore I hope:
ה	3:22 The covenant love (חסדי) of YHWH —it is never exhausted, nor do his compassions ever end;
ה	3:23 They are renewed (חדשים) every morning; great is your faithfulness.
ה	3:24 ...

The triple-acrostic form accentuates the crossover, which subtly resists the formal constraints of the poem. Even as the artifice struggles to contain the poetic expression, the poet grapples with his own emotions and the constraints of a “good theology” of a righteous sufferer.

#### 4 Lamentations 4-5

Following the intensification of the acrostic form in Lam 3, Lam 4 and 5 diminish and finally abandon the acrostic altogether. Lamentations 4 follows the same pattern as 1-2, but with only two lines per stanza. Dobbs-Allsopp notes that 4:22 *completes* the acrostic with the “completion” of Zion’s punishment/iniquity (תם־עונך בת־ציון).<sup>42</sup>

Lamentations 5, perhaps like Pss 16, 29, 32, 33 and 38, is a pseudo-acrostic,<sup>43</sup> containing twenty-two lines but not achieving acrostic form.<sup>44</sup> The

<sup>42</sup> Frederick W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Lamentations,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1177.

<sup>43</sup> Giffone, “A ‘Perfect’ Poem,” 56, 72.

<sup>44</sup> Siegfried Bergler’s claim of having discovered a non-alphabetic acrostic in Lam 5 is less than convincing; see Siegfried Bergler, “Threni V: nur ein alphabetisierendes Lied? Versuch einer Deutung,” *VT* 27 (1977): 304-20.

brevity of the poem (half the length of Lam 4 and one-third as long as Lam 1, 2 and 3) and the abandonment of the acrostic form focus the attention on the desperate plea contained within. Lamentations 5 repeats the "look and see" protest of Lam 1 and 2, but rather than "waiting" for the twentieth verse as Lam 1 and 2 do, 5:1 places this appeal front and centre, immediately disrupting any notion of a "proper" acrostic order.

Like Lam 1 and 2, Lam 5 contains a crossover between the eleventh and twelfth verses. Amidst the first-person plural description of Judah's present situation, 5:11-14 interrupts with a third-person litany concerning the suffering of all the different members of society:

**Lam 5    Discourse    Speaker    Addressee    Object**

1	Appeal	Judahites ("we")	YHWH	Judahites ("us")
2-10	Description			
11		Observer	General	Judahites ("them")
12-14				
15-18	Appeal	Judahites ("we")	YHWH	Judahites ("us")
19-22				

Perhaps such a progression would be negligible in other poetic discourses, but the juxtaposition with the acrostics makes the crossover of 5:11 notable. The rebellion against the acrostic form, in the fronting of the appeal and the resistance of the "acrostic" divisions, is complete.

The decline and fall of the acrostic in Lam 4-5 signals the failure of the book to achieve completeness. Lamentations 1-4 revealed some cracks in the rigid form, but the final chapter, with its stark content and blunt protest, adamantly resists any attempt to impose artificial order.

## 5 Summary

Studies in Lamentations and the other Hebrew acrostics indicate that even within the constraints of the elegant, symmetrical form there is creativity,

diversity, resistance and asymmetry.<sup>45</sup> The use of acrostic form involves imposition of order upon disorder and diversity. The consistent use of such a contrived form in a book about death, chaos, disorder and fragmentation leads the reader to investigate the implications of the form for interpretation.<sup>46</sup>

Fundamentally, the alphabetic acrostic form connotes completeness, submission and wholeness. Variations upon or deviations from that baseline indicate tendencies toward incompleteness, resistance and fragmentation. These variations in form actually serve as part of the "content" of the poem, accentuating certain stanzas, lines, phrases or words.

## D FRAGMENTED JUDAH IN LAMENTATIONS

This section will examine the evidence of the fragmentation of Judah in each chapter of Lamentations. As in the Sumerian city laments, the city of Judah is personified as a woman deprived of her children.

Zion's fragmented children experience many different calamities in Lamentations. Four categories of Zion's children are mentioned within Lamentations: the dead, the captives (*golah*), those who have fled (Diaspora), and those left desolate in the land (*she'erit*).

### 1 Lamentations 1

Lamentations 1 is directly focused on the city of Jerusalem, personified as Daughter Zion. However, this does not necessarily limit the drama to a particular spatial location; "Judah" has gone into exile and dwells among the nations (1:3), yet Daughter Zion still sits desolate within the city (1:12). The Judahite people, Zion's children, experience a variety of fates.

Lamentations 1 utilises two voices: a third-person poetic narrator (1-9b, 10-11b, 17) and Daughter Zion (9c, 11c-16, 18-22). Both of these perspectives speak of the entirety and indiscriminacy of the destruction of Judah.

The narrator describes the sufferings of priests (1:4), young women (1:4), children (1:5), princes (1:6), and the people (אֵם) as a collective (1:7, 11). Daughter Zion speaks of her warriors and young men (1:15), desolate children (1:16), young men and women (1:18), and priests and elders (1:19). Her suffering as a personification of the community extends to her entire body: nakedness

<sup>45</sup> In fact, the artificial constraints of the acrostic serve to heighten the creativity of the poet; see Scott N. Callaham, "An Evaluation of Psalm 119 as Constrained Writing," *HS* 50 (2009): 121-135.

<sup>46</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp observes, "Lamentations through literary artifice, through language, is able to give meaning where meaning is otherwise absent. Hence, the simple act of helping the community to regain its voice is profoundly theological in its ramification" ("Tragedy, Tradition and Theology," 58).

(1:8), genitals (1:7, 8, 10<sup>47</sup>), bones and feet (1:13), neck (1:14), eyes (1:16), bowels (1:20), and heart (1:20, 22).

Furthermore, the attack has scattered the community. Children, young people and Judah herself have gone into exile or captivity (1:3, 5, 7, 18). Many have perished in the city or the countryside (1:15, 19-20). A surviving *she'erit* lives among the ruins (1:4), while princes have fled in search of protection elsewhere (1:6).

## 2 Lamentations 2

Lamentations 2 begins with a barrage of attack by YHWH against Zion and her sanctuary. 2:1-8 is composed almost exclusively of YHWH's actions in Zion's destruction. YHWH's actions leave only a few survivors: "rulers" are dishonoured (2:2); by implication there are those who "lament" (2:5); "king and priest" are "spurned" (2:6) and are now "among the nations" (2:9); prophets no longer see visions (2:9c), and elders are silent in the dust (2:10).

Lamentations 2:11-22 is primarily an account of the survivors and dead in Jerusalem (not the exiles to Babylon). Even though "none escaped or survived" (2:22), the survivors include starving children (2:11c-12, 19c), desolate and grieving mothers (2:12, 19-20), and discredited prophets (2:14). The dead are priests and prophets (2:20), and young men, young women and elders (2:21).

## 3 Lamentations 3

Lamentations 3:1-33 represents a shift in focus away from the personified city to the sufferings of the *geber*, a male individual who suffered greatly in the destruction. The descriptions of his various afflictions could be interpreted as representative of the community as a whole.

The second half of the poem is oriented toward the community, including a prayer of penitence and imprecation (3:40-66). *Golah* captives are alluded to (3:34, 45, 52), as are the dead of war (3:43) and the oppressed *she'erit* (3:35, 51).

Lamentations 3, rather than focusing on the totality and indiscriminacy of the destruction, takes a measured, wisdom-centred approach to suffering. This is the most penitential of the poems in Lamentations, which has led many scholars to date the poem later and connect it with the genre of penitential prayers (see discussion below).

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<sup>47</sup> Frederick W. Dobbs-Allsopp and Tod Linafelt, "The Rape of Zion in Thr 1,10," *ZAW* 113 (2001): 77-81.

#### 4 Lamentations 4

Zion's children experience several different fates in Lamentations 4. In addition to those who have perished in the war (4:5-6), many survivors have starved (4:3-4, 9-10). A *she'erit* community includes starving babies (4:4) as well as debased princes (4:7-8).

Lamentations 4:14-16 appears to refer to the *golah* and Diaspora communities, living disgraced in Babylon and abroad. These Judahites included "priests" and "elders" whom YHWH had scattered (4:16), but they were considered "unclean," "fugitives" and "wanderers" (4:15). 4:20 describes the king, "YHWH's anointed," as having been captured and taken into exile with some of the people.

Lamentations 4:17-19 describes the attempts to escape Jerusalem into the hill country and the neighbouring nations. Lamentations 4:21-22 invokes punishment upon Edom. Edom is repeatedly singled out for condemnation in the Prophets for failing to come to Judah's aid and mistreating the Judahite refugees (Ezek 25, 35; Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11; Obad 11).

Like the first two poems, Lamentations 4 mentions a wide swath of people who suffer indiscriminately: infants and children (4:4, 10), the wealthy (4:5), princes (4:7), women (4:10), prophets, priests and elders (4:13, 16).

#### 5 Lamentations 5

Lamentations 5 sharply focuses YHWH's attention on the situation of the *she'erit* community, the remnant still in Judah. The complaint centres on the oppression of the community by foreigners.

Though there is no direct reference to the *golah* community, its absence is keenly felt in the lack of a ruling class to keep order and justice. The land is now owned by foreign patricians (5:2), on whom the working class must now rely for sustenance (5:4, 6, 8-9). There is no גואל to redeem the oppressed (5:3, 8); wealthy men of strength are either dead (5:7) or enslaved (5:12, 14). YHWH, eternally enthroned (5:19), is the lone hope of the *she'erit* community, a hope portrayed (perhaps in *golah* terms) as שׁוּב (מ)קדָם ("return [from] the east," 5:21).

#### 6 Summary

Through its use of different voices and its focus on the suffering of many different communities and classes of people, Lamentations gives voice to a fragmented people. By including different personal testimonies of suffering and theological perspectives on Judah's destruction, Lamentations has a unifying effect on the community.

The poems of Lamentations, like the psalms of communal lament, appear to treat the various communities of scattered Judah as *equally* important members of the community. Though these psalms and the poems of Lamentations describe in detail the desolation of the land and its remaining inhabitants, those who have fled or been exiled are equally mourned as victims of the destruction.

## **E RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS OF LAMENTATIONS**

The two previous sections sought to establish that Lamentations in both form and content speaks of and to a fragmented community. This section examines the unifying rhetorical function of Lamentations within the exilic and postexilic communities and beyond. The first sub-section compares two approaches to perpetuating the religious tradition of Judah found in Lamentations. The second sub-section examines the rhetorical applications of a de-historicised book of Lamentations.

### **1 Community Reconstitution**

A primary purpose of a communal lament, as mentioned previously, is to give voice to a suffering group in the sight of the public and the deity. The way in which the oppressed community vocalises its complaint will shape the future of that community as the deity or broader public is mobilised, either to act on the sufferers' behalf or to silence their protest.

Lamentations, by utilising diverse perspectives, voices and settings in its complaint, draws several different sorts of possible futures for the Judahite communities. Dobbs-Allsopp and Boda have examined the rhetorical strategies of Lam 2 and 3 respectively. Interestingly, though these poems of protest differ in perspective, voice and rhetorical strategy, they appear to propose/envision futures for Judah that are similar in important respects. Lamentations 2 and 3 point to a "portable" future for the Zion tradition—that is, a future that is not tied to a particular temple or land.

In "R(az/ais)ing Zion in Lamentations 2," Dobbs-Allsopp explores the nature and structure of Zion's protest in the second poem.<sup>48</sup> He argues that one of the goals of the Lamentations poet is to perpetuate the Zion tradition, one of the strongest traditions in Israel's history, even in the wake of the Zion's destruction.

In Lam 2, the poet attempts this preservation in two steps. First, he offers a stark account of the complete *razing* of "the city, its temple, and supporting mythologies" by YHWH himself (2:1-8). Next, through "vocativity" (2:13-19) and "defiant vocality" (2:20-22), the poet *raises* Zion into the posi-

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<sup>48</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, "R(az/ais)ing Zion in Lamentations 2," 21-68.



tion of ongoing protest.<sup>49</sup> The ongoing fact of Zion's humiliation now cries out against YHWH, thus preserving a more "portable" Zion tradition in the exile/Diaspora:

The Zion at the outset of Lamentations 2 (material Zion, the Zion of temple and cult, the place of divine habitation memorialized in the songs of Zion) is razed and demolished and at poem's end replaced by a different kind of Zion—a Zion of the mind and text who nevertheless through impersonation maintains a site for divinity, whose speaking voice tokens survival and preserves and sustains the ever-fragile trace of her formal architectural self until such a time in the future as geography and architecture can once again channel divinity.<sup>50</sup>

In the essay, "The Priceless Gain of Penitence," Boda seeks a helpful model for contemporary religious expression by examining the progression of exilic and postexilic liturgical expressions. He compares two exilic/postexilic forms of liturgical expression: the penitential prayer (e.g., Ezra 9; Neh 1, 9; Dan 9; cf. Ps 106) and the lament (quintessentially, the book of Lamentations), and tries to demonstrate how the latter led to the formation of the former.

By outlining the key elements of penitential prayers and laments, Boda highlights similarities and dissimilarities between the two forms. Penitential prayers are intended to "bring an end to the devastating effects of the fall of the state: either to captivity, oppression, or the sorry condition of Palestine."<sup>51</sup> He asserts that the tradition can be traced as early as the Persian period; he finds allusions to Neh 9 in the speeches of the prose inclusio of Zech 1-8.<sup>52</sup> He contrasts the penitential prayers with Lam 1-2 and 4-5 in the following respects:

- Lamentations regularly employs malediction against enemies, a technique absent from penitential prayer;
- Lamentations has more vivid and extensive descriptions of distress, whereas penitential prayers pay more attention to the admission of guilt;
- Lamentations hesitates to incorporate the foolishness of former generations into a communal guilt, as penitential prayer does;

<sup>49</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, "R(az/ais)ing Zion in Lamentations 2," 21.

<sup>50</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, "R(az/ais)ing Zion in Lamentations 2," 67.

<sup>51</sup> Mark J. Boda, "The Priceless Gain of Penitence: From Communal Lament to Penitential Prayer in the 'Exilic' Liturgy of Israel," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (ed. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo; Atlanta: SBL, 2008) 83.

<sup>52</sup> Boda, "Priceless Gain," 85.

- God's mercy and his Law are nearly absent in Lamentations but are major themes in penitential prayers.<sup>53</sup>

Boda tries to discover the organic connection between the two, using Lam 3 (a "minority voice" in Lamentations) as a sort of mediating form, "the greatest point of contact with these later expressions."<sup>54</sup> In Lam 3 the Zion tradition "recedes into the background" in favour of a penitential emphasis on "grace apart from Zion."<sup>55</sup> The Zion tradition was thought to be unsustainable in the exile/Diaspora after the destruction of the temple, the death of the king and the capture of Jerusalem. Thus, the Zion tradition in Lam 3 is "muted."<sup>56</sup>

These two arguments share a focus on *portability* of tradition in the exile/Diaspora. With its members scattered in Babylon, Edom and Egypt, Judah looked for ways to perpetuate its identity. Since both the Zion tradition (with its hope for restoration of the temple, land and monarchy) and the penitential tradition are found in Babylonian- and Persian-era literature, it is not surprising that both traditions would be present in Lamentations.

## 2 Timelessness and Portability

In some sense "timelessness" and "portability" are merely inherent properties of language, particularly of poetic language. The general purpose of poetry is to convey a sentiment or idea through the use of elevated or distanciating language<sup>57</sup>—a sentiment or idea which transcends the immediate experience of the poet and touches the experience of the reader/hearer.

Certain sorts of discourse (poetry, stylised prose) are clearly more adaptable or "portable" than others (narrative, census lists). Each discourse has its own limited potential to communicate and its own range of appropriate contexts. Adaptability of a discourse is dependent upon the genre, language, and intended purpose of the discourse. Adaptability is also contingent upon the degree to which the meaning of the discourse depends on the medium, style, language, and other features.

Most of the analysis of Lamentations presented to this point presupposes intentionality at various stages of the text's development—in the composition, oral performance, transcription, editing and collection. Yet authorial intent has

<sup>53</sup> Boda, "Priceless Gain," 89-90.

<sup>54</sup> Boda, "Priceless Gain," 95.

<sup>55</sup> Boda, "Priceless Gain," 96. Contra Dobbs-Allsopp, Boda views the Zion tradition primarily as an election tradition rather than as an ethical vision (96 n57); cf. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition and Theology," 46-47.

<sup>56</sup> Boda, "The Priceless Gain of Penitence," 96.

<sup>57</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1-14, esp. 5-6; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 9, 76.

only limited impact on interpretation and appropriation—the “intentional fallacy” must be avoided. Lamentations, like all other canonical scripture, has been subject to appropriation, interpretation and application in many other contexts than that of Judah in the aftermath of 587 B.C.E.

Lamentations, though it describes the aftermath of a historical event, contains few explicit historical references. Lamentations 1:8 contains a veiled reference to the Babylonians: “For she has seen nations enter her holy place, [nations] of which you commanded, ‘They must not enter your sanctuary.’”<sup>58</sup> Lamentations 4:21-22 condemns Edom, but the nature of Edom’s offense is not made explicit. Lamentations 5:6 laments the necessity of soliciting food and provision from Egypt and Asshur.

Perhaps the book of Lamentations veils any reference to the Babylonians for fear of reprisal.<sup>59</sup> Yet Ps 137, apparently “an immediate reaction to disaster” by the *golah* community, does not hesitate to imprecate Babylon (or Edom) in the harshest of terms.<sup>60</sup> One effect of Lamentations’ lack of historical references, whether intentional or unintentional, is that the book becomes applicable across many contexts as an expression of grief, anger and despair. Lamentations is not unique in this regard, however; many other lament psalms are vague or unspecific regarding their particular historical circumstances.

Joyce discusses several sorts of ways Lamentations may be used apart from its historical context.<sup>61</sup> He identifies four categories of ahistorical approaches: liturgical, psychological, literary and ideological. The study of these approaches, Joyce explains, is intended not to displace but to complement historical-critical examination of Lamentations.<sup>62</sup>

## 2a Liturgical

In addition to its possible liturgical use at the site of the destroyed temple, Lamentations is traditionally read in the synagogue on the Ninth of Av to com-

<sup>58</sup> In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Jeffrey Tigay explains: “Since the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, who are not mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:4-9, Lamentations evidently assumes that the four nations that *are* mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:4-9 stand for *all* foreigners” (478, emphasis original). These nations are Moab and Ammon (MT 23:4-7), and Edom and Egypt (MT 23:8-9). See Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> Jeremiah (25:26 and 51:41) veils references to the king of Babylon through use of an *atbash* (אֶתְבָּשׁ) cipher: בבל becomes ששך.

<sup>60</sup> Middlemas, *The Templeless Age*, 38.

<sup>61</sup> Paul M. Joyce, “Sitting Loose to History: Reading the Book of Lamentations Without Primary Reference to Its Original Historical Setting,” in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements* (ed. E. Ball; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 246-62.

<sup>62</sup> Joyce, “Sitting Loose,” 259-262.

memorate the destruction of the temple; this liturgical use may have been part of the book's origins.<sup>63</sup> Yet long after the temple was rebuilt and destroyed again, Lamentations played a key role in "articulating corporate Jewish identity and memory in a whole sequence of tragic situations in the story of the Jews down through the centuries."<sup>64</sup> The Targum of Lamentations (TgLam) claims that YHWH mourned the fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden using Lamentations (TgLam 1:1). TgLam also associates Lamentations with the weeping of the children of Israel when they reject the offer of the Promised Land in Num 14:1 (TgLam 1:2), the death of Josiah (TgLam 1:18; 4:20), the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. (TgLam 1:19), the martyrdom of the prophet Zechariah (TgLam 2:20), and several other historical events all the way up to the seventh century C.E.<sup>65</sup>

This indicates, Joyce concludes, that Lamentations became "a vehicle for communal and personal devotion."<sup>66</sup> A liturgical reading is "a loosening of the moorings of the text within ancient history." Since the referent of the text—God—is transcendent, the reading of the text transcends time and place.<sup>67</sup> Cohen likewise affirms that the Rabbinic interpretations of Lamentations were not terribly concerned with the "time-bound" historical setting of the book, but instead looked for an overarching "timeless" paradigm for understanding sin, suffering and divine retribution.<sup>68</sup>

Childs contends that this application of Lamentations does not detract from the book's historic character, but rather secures its ongoing influence down through history:

The effect of the canonical process on the book of Lamentations was not one of dehistoricizing the fully time-conditioned response of the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem. Rather, the response was brought in to relationship with a dimension of faith which provided a religious context from which to seek meaning in suffering. One of the results of incorporating the events of the city's destruction into Israel's traditional terminology of worship was to establish a semantic bridge between the historical situation of the early sixth century and the language of faith which struggles with divine judgment. For this reason the book of Lamentations serves every successive

<sup>63</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose," 248-49.

<sup>64</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose," 249.

<sup>65</sup> Christian M. M. Brady, *The Rabbinic Targum of Lamentations: Vindicating God* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 127-131, 155-167.

<sup>66</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose to History," 249.

<sup>67</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose to History," 250.

<sup>68</sup> Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 19-20.

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generation of the suffering faithful for whom history has become unbearable.<sup>69</sup>

## 2b Psychological

Lamentations provides a way to deal with grief and loss in many different contexts.<sup>70</sup> Mintz examines the rhetorical devices used in Lamentations to address three dilemmas of the Destruction: the collective nature of the event, the utter violation of the covenant relationship between Israel and YHWH, and the role of poetic language and perspective.<sup>71</sup> He writes:

Ancient writers, no more than their successors, were denied the possibility of transcribing directly and unaffectedly the authentic cry of human pain in the purity of its original expression.<sup>72</sup> If the Book of Lamentations does indeed exhude [sic] a sense of primal outrage, it is only because its authors labored and schemed to exploit in new ways the devices of language available to them in order to mount a successful literary representation of primal outrage.<sup>73</sup>

Mintz shows how the personification of Israel (both as Daughter Zion and as the *geber* of Lam 3) creates empathy for the victim in the face of her persecutor: YHWH himself. He argues that YHWH's refusal to answer, another rhetorical technique, is what makes the book a lament—a self-fabricated and self-administered comfort—rather than a consolation. These techniques permit Lamentations to be appropriated in any context as an expression of pain, anguish and anger toward God. Joyce adds that Lamentations' diversity of perspectives on pain is consistent with what modern psychology has to say about the way humans react to loss.<sup>74</sup>

## 2c Literary

Joyce cautiously celebrates the contributions of literary approaches to the study of Lamentations in the latter half of the twentieth century. The influence of the "linguistic turn" on biblical studies has moved interpretation "away from the notion of fixed and precise meaning, defined as the original meaning or even the author's intention, to the recognition of openness of meaning in biblical

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<sup>69</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 596.

<sup>70</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose to History," 250-52.

<sup>71</sup> Alan Mintz, "The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 1-17.

<sup>72</sup> There are no words sufficient to describe such pain (Mintz, "Rhetoric of Lamentations," 1).

<sup>73</sup> Mintz, "Rhetoric of Lamentations," 1.

<sup>74</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose to History," 250. See also Paul M. Joyce, "Lamentations and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading," *BibInt* 1 (1993): 304-20.

material."<sup>75</sup> The present study is greatly indebted to several literary approaches to Lamentations, including studies of the performative and rhetorical nature of the laments in general, explorations of intertextuality with the Prophets (especially the works of Lee and Mandolfo), and poetic discourse analysis.

Lamentations is not unique as an object of fruitful literary study in the age of postmodernism and radical historicism.<sup>76</sup> Yet Lamentations appears to lend itself more naturally to "ahistorical" literary study than certain other works of biblical literature. Poetry, more than prose or other forms of discourse, is multivalent and ambiguous. Lamentations in particular—with its anonymity of composition, its rigid artificial form, its plurality of voices, its intertextuality with other Hebrew scripture, and its "shock value"—is ripe for deconstructive and destabilising readings.

It is certainly the case that not all literary approaches are of equal value for interpretation. In comparison with other ahistorical readings of Lamentations, literary approaches are quite recent and have not enjoyed nearly as wide an application as liturgical and personal readings.<sup>77</sup>

## 2d Ideological

Ideological approaches to Lamentations seem to go in two directions: ideological deconstruction of the book, or adaptation of the book to serve an ideology. The Targum of Lamentations is an early example of the latter approach, which is particularly relevant to the present discussion. The historical question of Lamentations is fundamentally the tension between the Abrahamic and Davidic promises and Judah's exilic situation. While MT Lamentations leaves open the possibility that YHWH might have gone too far, TgLam settles the question quite decisively in YHWH's favour. Brady explains:

Where the Book of Lamentations is an expression of grief and an outpouring of pain with little concern for maintaining a systematic theology, TgLam is concerned with vindicating God, acquitting the LORD of any perceived guilt, and bringing Lamentations into line with contemporary rabbinic theological beliefs. It also sought to direct its audience to proper rabbinic worship through repentance and the study of Mishnah and Torah.<sup>78</sup>

Lamentations thus was useful for Jewish leaders attempting to perpetuate their communities.

<sup>75</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose to History," 252.

<sup>76</sup> In "How Lonely Sits the Text," Giffone explores the great value of postmodern readings of the Hebrew Bible from an evangelical perspective, with certain caveats.

<sup>77</sup> Joyce, "Sitting Loose to History," 262.

<sup>78</sup> Brady, *The Rabbinic Targum of Lamentations*, 134.

### 3 Summary

Lamentations, partly by design and partly by interpretive creativity, is a portable and adaptable basis for tradition. Its portable literary features make the book a valuable tool for preserving community unity in adversity in contexts beyond its original historical setting. Even though other biblical texts are adaptable by tradition in various other settings, Lamentations has quite easily stood outside of historical place and time to speak to and for the faith communities.

### F CONCLUSIONS

This paper has asserted that Lamentations, by design and by appropriation, contributes to community cohesion amid disaster. Furthermore, Lamentations, by design and by appropriation, is an adaptable piece of literature that contributed to a portable religious and social tradition.

The "success" of Lamentations—as liturgy, as expression of grief, and as instrument of community cohesion—is partly due to the literary skill of its creator(s), and partly due to hermeneutics. Whether or not the creator(s) of Lamentations had a grand vision of an eschatological restoration of the Judahite community, the book's themes, motifs and features lent themselves to such adaptation and appropriation in the aftermath of 587 B.C.E. and beyond.

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Benjamin D. Giffone, doctoral candidate, Department of Old & New Testament, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch; adjunct faculty, School of Divinity, Cairn University, Langhorne, Pennsylvania, USA. *Email*: benjamingiffone@gmail.com