

## Hope from a Linear Reading of Lamentations

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### Abstract

*This article investigates whether a linear reading of the book of Lamentations is able to produce the same results as a concentric reading. A number of scholars have argued that a concentric reading of the book of Lamentations results in a chiasmic structure that places Lamentations 3 at the centre. The central part is anchored on the words of hope uttered by the גבר. Besides the concentric reading of the text, one may opt for a linear reading of the text. It is observed in this article that if one opts for a linear reading, three of the five laments end with an imprecation. Two of the five laments end with a prayer. Such a conclusion of the laments shows a hopeful ending rather than a doubtful ending. It is therefore argued that the hopeful tone from a concentric reading can still be found from a linear reading of the text of Lamentations.*

**Keywords:** Linear; Concentric; Imprecation; Deuteronomistic; Hope

### Introduction

Interest in the book of Lamentations continues to grow. Goldingay (2022:29) describes it as an explosion of interest. Interest generated not only by its elaborate poetic devices but also because of the theology of the book. Two polemics have been created as a result. There are scholars who promote a linear reading of the text based on the content and theology of the text, and there are scholars who are compelled by the poetic devices (e.g. alphabetic acrostics and chiasm) to embrace concentric reading. A linear reading of the text is the traditional reading which focuses on sequence (i.e. in the case of the book of Lamentations, emphasis is on first, second, third, fourth and fifth), chronology (the series of the laments), hierarchy (i.e. ascending or descending) and coherence. Thus, issues such as logic, order, progression and continuity from first to last are critical<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand a concentric reading of the text focuses on the overall literary structure dictated by the poetic devices. So in the case of the book of Lamentations, attention is given to the chiasmic structure and other poetic devices that bind all the laments together. Some of the most prominent scholars who focus on the poetic devices include Gottwald (1954) and Shea (1979).

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<sup>1</sup> Linear Text vs. Nonlinear Text - What's the Difference? | This vs. That (thisvs-that.io)

A number of scholars<sup>2</sup> have argued that a concentric reading of the book proves that the book's central argument, which comes in Lamentations 3:22–33, is hope. This hope is generated by a reflection on the *חסד* and *רחמים* of God. However, there have been some negative reactions on the elevation of Chapter 3 at the expense of other chapters, specifically Chapters 1 and 2. Those that advocate for the elevation of Chapters 1 and 2 feel that the elevation of Chapter 3 undermines the open protest against God that is introduced at the beginning of the book. In the end, two polemics in terms of theology are established. One is for *theodicy* (i.e. God is justified to punish Judah for her sins) and the other is *antitheodicy* (i.e. God is wrong in his excessive dealings with Judah). Embedded in their quest to prioritise Chapters 1 and 2 is the desire to argue for a hopeless ending of the book of Lamentations so that the protest is seen as continual dialogue (Mandolfo, 2007). Building on Mandolfo (2007), Linafelt (2000) concludes that there is no hope in Lamentations. Since Mandolfo and Linafelt are reacting against the concentric reading of the text, it is important to closely follow the alternative reading and figure out the results. Accordingly, this paper's concern is to explore whether a linear reading of the book will yield the same results as a concentric reading. In this regard, the key question is this: Does a linear reading of the book of Lamentation lead to hope or despair?

This paper argues that just as a concentric reading of the book of Lamentations leads to hope, so does a linear reading. In other words, hope comes from both a linear and a concentric reading of the book of Lamentations. A linear reading of the book will lead to hope mainly because of the endings of Lamentations 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. Although a linear reading graphically considers the texts from beginning to end, our main concern in this paper are the endings of the laments. Lamentations 1, 3 and 4 all end with imprecations. Lamentations 2 and 5 end with prayers that anticipate God's answer. Thus, the imprecations of 1, 3 and 4 and the prayers of 2 and 5 all hopefully anticipate God's perfect answer.

In terms of procedure, this paper purposefully selects and analyses concluding verses of each lament in the book of Lamentations. In order to do this responsibly, an overview of each lament is given to provide a background context before drawing attention to the concluding verses. Thus I first highlight the need for a linear reading followed by the analyses of the last verses of all five laments<sup>3</sup>. The laments are analysed from the first to the fifth before wrapping everything with a conclusion that summarises all the findings.

### Arguments for the Linear Reading

The argument for a linear reading is systematically linked to the structure and poetic devices used in the book. Shea (1979) argues that the acrostics and the *qinah* meter in Lamentations 1–5 provide a descending structure. This descending structure is composed of two cycles; one of the cycles is larger (Lamentations 1–3) and the other is smaller (Lamentations 4–5). The first larger cycle is composed of multiples of three and the shorter cycle composed of multiples of two.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Dorsey (1999:248), arguing from the literary structure of the book, contends that Lamentations 3:21–32 is the high point and center of the book. Parry (2010:92) also argues that Lamentations 3 is central to the understanding of the whole book of Lamentations.

<sup>3</sup> Lamentations 1:17–22; Lamentations 2:17–22; Lamentations 3:55–66; Lamentations 4: 21–22; Lamentations 5:19–22

However, there are points of critique related to Shea. Firstly, he does well to bring together the macro and micro elements of the acrostics. However, there is a need to connect the acrostics to the beginning and concluding aspects of each lament rather than just to say that it was written in remembrance of Jerusalem, the city that died away. Secondly, the argument for a descending structure is supported better by the *qinah* meter rather than the acrostics. The acrostics are more inclined to support a concentric approach than a linear approach. Thirdly, the figure of 5 supports not only *qinah* meter but also a chiasmic structure. Therefore, the fact that there are five laments can be an argument for both the *qinah* meter as well as a chiasmic structure. In the absence of other compelling supporting poetic devices for the number 5, it becomes a case of either or. Another notable weakness with Shea (1979) is the failure to deal with the *ayekah* formulae, which is one of the evident major devices in addition to the acrostic and *qinah* meter. Nevertheless, his work is crucial, as it lays the foundation that helps to swing the tide from the dominant concentric reading of the text.

On the theological front, Mandolfo (2007) and Linafelt (2000) are helpful insofar as they push a reconsideration of a dialogue of *theodicy* and *antitheodicy* because of the elevation of Lamentations 1 and 2.

### Lamentations 1

Lamentations 1 has been summarised in various ways by different authors. Provan (1991), Parry (2010) and Wright (2015) summarise Lamentations 1 as "No comfort", drawing from verses 9,16,17,21. Scholars reading the text from a trauma-studies perspective see this as evidence of isolation<sup>4</sup> in the grief process. Hillers (1972) prefers the title "Is there any pain like mine", drawing from verse 12.

Two voices dominate Lamentations 1. The voice of the narrator, who narrates what happened in the third person. Then there is the voice of daughter Zion who cries out in the first person. Hillers (1972:79) suggests that the movement from 3<sup>rd</sup> person to 1<sup>st</sup> person serves as an invitation to participate in the anguish as well as to heighten the expression of anguish.

Although the conclusions from Provan and Parry highlighting the fact that there is no one to comfort is significant, one has to notice also the movement of daughter Zion from focusing on alliances to focusing on God. This becomes very clear from verses 17 to 22. According to verse 17, it is God who has decreed that all potential defenders of Zion will become her enemies. So Zion has no other option except to turn to God, the very one who has decreed the disaster. As Zion assesses the situation that has led to this, she concludes that God is righteous and she is wrong because she has rebelled. Thus, her assessment is based on the retribution theology and covenant stipulations most likely drawn from Deuteronomy. Having assessed this, she then bursts into prayer in verse 20. The NIV rightly translates יהוה as vocative to show clearly the prayer aspect, since it follows the *qal* imperative ראה. The prayer brings to the fore how Zion is troubled by her guilt. She has internal affliction of her guilt in addition to the external experience of war, death and suffering. In her vain search for a comforter, she, on the contrary, observes that her enemies are in fact rejoicing at her suffering. Most likely influenced by a

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<sup>4</sup> Middlemas, 2021:79

meditation on the sages' prohibition of celebration of the fall of enemies<sup>5</sup>, the prayer turns into imprecation.

In the imprecation, attention is drawn to the "May you bring the day you have announced so that they may become like me". Although the NIV has brought 'May' to the front, the Hebrew verb *הבאת* is a *hifil* perfect. There have been some efforts to emend the perfect to imperative alongside the Syriac<sup>6</sup>. However, taking this as a *hifil* perfect will mean that the *qatal* form has been translated as a realizable wish<sup>7</sup>. The ultimate effect is that the translation aligns well with the jussive *יִהְיֶה*. 'The day you have announced' is a reference to the day of God's judgment on the nations spoken of in Jeremiah 25:15–38. This imprecation is therefore premised on a solid, assured foundation from the prophets that God was going to judge the enemies of Judah. Since in Lamentations 4:21 the enemy, who is identified as rejoicing, is Edom, perhaps daughter Zion is singing this imprecation reflecting and in unison with Psalm 137<sup>8</sup>.

Verse 22 starts with a *yiqtol* that has been translated as a jussive by the NIV. Thus, the strong wish<sup>9</sup> is expressed by the 'Let'. The word translated 'wickedness' by the NIV is *רעה*, which basically means evil<sup>10</sup>. Youngblood (2011:1326) connects this to another imprecatory Psalm, 109:14–15. The effect of the prayer is to express the aspect of the continual presence of the sins of the enemy before God. The continual presence of the enemy's sins before God will lead God to punish the enemy the way he punished Zion. The prayer ends in a spectacular turn to focus on the first person. 'My groans are many' and 'My heart is faint' are also found in Jeremiah 8:18. This affirms a dialogue with the prophetic tradition. More importantly, it ties the conclusions of Lamentations 1 and Lamentations 5. However in Lamentations 5:17, since it is now a communal prayer, the first person singular is replaced with the first person plural.

From the above analysis, it can be ascertained that the writer of Lamentations 1 is reflecting on the wisdom literature, the prophets and the deuteronomistic tradition. The overall picture of the chapter is that there is nowhere to turn to for comfort except to turn to God, who has allowed the calamity. The conclusion of the chapter is not a hopeless prayer but a prayer given with aspects of imprecations and with a sure hope that God is able to answer. It is fashioned in such a way that it is reminiscent of Lamentations 5, which concludes the book.

## Lamentations 2

Lamentations 2 has been viewed as focusing on the anger of God by a number of scholars. For instance, Provan (1991) gives the title 'swallowed up in anger', Parry (2010) summarises the chapter as 'wrath', and Wright (2015) as 'In the day of God's anger'. This clearly shows that the anger of God takes centre stage in Lamentations 2.

As established at the beginning, our concern lies mainly in the conclusion of the laments. In that case, we quickly turn our focus to the conclusion of Lamentations 2. Salters (2014:109) observes well that Lamentations 2 concludes with a prayer, and the

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 17:5 and 24:17

<sup>6</sup> Hillers, 1992:78

<sup>7</sup> Van de Merwe, Naude and Kroeze, 2017:160

<sup>8</sup> See Psalm 137:7

<sup>9</sup> Bornemann, 1998:225.

<sup>10</sup> Holladay, 1988:342

ball is placed right in God's court to act. Prayer is usually given by an offerer who expects a positive answer from a deity.

Verse 17 of Lamentations 2 makes it clear that it is God who has brought the calamity and has fulfilled his word which was decreed long ago. This prompts us to search where the promise was made which is now being fulfilled. One cannot avoid thinking of the list of blessings and curses found in Deuteronomy 28 and the threats of Leviticus 26:23–39. The threats of punishment for disobedience are carried over into the prophets<sup>11</sup>. Although there is indication that the Lord's hand will continue to be raised in executing punishment, there is also the promise of restoration once sin is confessed in the prophets. For example, in Isaiah 3 there is punishment, but in Isaiah 4 there is restoration. Besides passages that directly speak about Judah, Lamentations 2 could also be reflecting on passages that were dedicated to the northern kingdom of Israel. Such passages have references to women, widows, the fatherless<sup>12</sup> and more importantly to cannibalism<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, the Deuteronomistic tradition exhorts those who experience punishment to repent and enjoy forgiveness<sup>14</sup>. Convinced by the assurance of restoration after penitence, the poet in Lamentations 2:18–19 advises daughter Zion to cry out to the Lord. Daughter Zion indeed turns to prayer in verses 20 to 21. Salters (2014:175) agrees that verses 20–21 depict the language of one who pleads in prayer and then provides similar constructions from the book of Psalms<sup>15</sup> and Isaiah<sup>16</sup>. The Prayer basically asks God to look and consider the nation's plight. Hillers (1992:108) suggests that the lack of explicit petition save 'to look on' could be a strong appeal to his compassion.

In Hebrew, the prayer begins the same way it began in 1:20, with the fronting of the imperative ראה followed by the vocative יהוה. After the vocative, another imperative is introduced. But unlike ראה, which is in the *qal*, the verb נבט is in the *hifil*. Thus, the NIV prefers to translate the entire clause as 'Look oh LORD and consider' in order to capture the different aspect of the *qal* and the *hifil*. It should be mentioned that there are two possible ways of splitting the clauses. One way is to consider both verbs in one clause, as suggested by the NIV and the NJB. The other way is the one that is suggested by the KJV: 'Behold, Oh LORD, and consider to whom thou has done this'. Thus, in this case the KJV attaches נבט to the rhetorical question. A number of scholars<sup>17</sup> prefer the stance taken by the NIV.

God is called upon to see and consider first who historically has ever suffered such severe punishment. The severity of the punishment is to the extent of cannibalism (specifically maternal mothers eating their own children). Thus the fate of the vulnerable group (i.e. women) and the innocent (i.e. babies) is put in the spotlight. Second, the severity of the punishment is to the extent of the desecration of the sanctuary by dead bodies (religious leaders being killed in the sanctuary). Goldingay (2022:117) brings clarity to the question when he says, "even if the priest teaches people in a misguided way, and even if the prophet is a misguided promiser of *shalom*, should the Lord's

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Isaiah 3:8–26 specifically talks about the punishment on Jerusalem and Judah.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 9:17–18

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 9:20.

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 30:1–10

<sup>15</sup> For example Psalm 80:15; 84:9

<sup>16</sup> For example Isaiah 63:15

<sup>17</sup> For example Salters (2014:176), Kaiser (1981:328) and Renkema (1998:319)

sanctuary be defiled by the shedding of their blood?" Daughter Zion might be reflecting on the prophetic tradition regarding the innocent children, who according to Ezekiel 18:4, 20 should not be punished for the sins of their parents. On the issue of the religious leaders, daughter Zion might be reflecting on the Zionist tradition, which sees the temple as God's dwelling place and inviolable<sup>18</sup>. Salters' suggestion that the poet's reference to the violation of the temple and cultic personnel is an appeal to Yahweh's self-respect is also acceptable. Thus, daughter Zion is protesting that the punishment is severe<sup>19</sup> compared to historical punishment of such sins as hers. In addition, daughter Zion's protest points to the promises of God in the prophetic and Zionist traditions. In the execution of the punishment, God should be mindful of his promises. Parry (2010:84) observes well that in the prayer, there is no rejection of Yahweh. There is protest, there is anger, but Zion's chance of salvation rests with God, who is her only hope.

In verse 21, daughter Zion shifts her tone from that of questioning to that of narration. She narrates what she sees from a broad perspective. First, the narration focuses on the distinct groups according to age (old versus young), and then according to sex (young men versus maidens). Second, the narration is turned into a picture of a feast with invited guests. The invited guests are terrors who come from all over the world. Verses 21 and 22 are conceptually joined together by God's anger. Verse 21 uses the pronominal suffix *אֶפֶךָ* בַּיּוֹם whereas verse 22 explicates the pronominal suffix. Thus *יְהוָה* is joined by a maqqef to *אֶף*. The final construction being *בַּיּוֹם אֶף-יְהוָה*. This phrase accomplishes three things. Firstly, it joins verses 21 and 22 together. Secondly, it brings meaning to the entire chapter. Thirdly, it forms an inclusion (i.e., verse 1 starts with the day of God's anger and verse 22 closes with the day of God's anger) of the chapter, thereby binding all the verses together. Thus Westermann (1994:159) concludes well that the day of the LORD's anger is the guiding theme for the entirety of Lamentations 2.

Goldingay (2022:118) advises us to take the phrase "no one escaped or survived" as a hyperbole, since according to Jeremiah, there were a few remnants who have survived. Special attention is drawn to Jeremiah 42:17 and 44:14. In Jeremiah 42:17, the hyperbole is used in reference to those who are determined to go to Egypt, whereas in Jeremiah 44:14, the concern is with those who have actually gone into Egypt. In that regard, Provan (1991:79) then concludes well that the hyperbole is meant to emphasise the magnitude of the catastrophe.

In the last clauses of verse 22, the combination of the verbs *רִבִּיתִי* and *טִפַּחְתִּי* has been translated in various ways. The NIV translates them as 'those I cared for and reared'. The KJV has 'those that I have swaddled and brought up'. The NJB puts it as 'Those whom I have nursed and reared'. Salters (2014:183) notes that the Septuagint translates this as 'whereas I have strengthened and multiplied all my enemies'. This translation does not make sense in light of the context.

The verb *טִפַּח* means to bear healthy children, in the traditional sense of carrying on palms or dandling<sup>20</sup>. *רִבָּה* basically means to be many, great, become numerous or multiply in its *qal* stem. However, in the context of Lamentations, it has been used in the

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 2:6; 48; 87

<sup>19</sup> According to Jeremiah 21:14 the punishment should equate the sin.

<sup>20</sup> Holladay, 1988: 125.

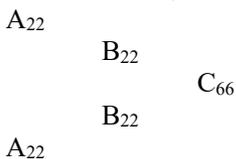
*piel* stem, which may best be seen more as a factitive<sup>21</sup> use than as an intensive use. Thus, the idea is that of bringing up children<sup>22</sup>. Salters (2014:184) suggests that this should be seen alongside Ezekiel 19:2, where the context is that of a lion rearing its cubs. Such a context adds the componential aspect of rearing and training.

Lamentations 2 closes off by noting that the enemy has destroyed all those who have been reared, brought up healthy, carried up on palms, those brought up like lion cubs, those that were given good rearing and training. It is important to note that, from 21 up to this point, daughter Zion has been directly addressing and accusing God in the second person pronoun (i.e. you have slain... You have slaughtered... you summoned...). But the conclusion is left ambiguous with 'my enemy' (אֹיֵבִי). As Parry (2010:85) notes, this enemy could be the LORD or it could be the human enemy. If the “enemy” is taken to refer to God, it means that God has turned into an enemy, which would mean the lament ends on a harsh tone. But if taken as a human enemy, daughter Zion is trying to end the lament without a finger directly pointing to God, perhaps toning down the protest in order to engage or give him an opportunity to answer.

To conclude this, we note that the second lament ends with a protest that is given within the rubric of a prayer. The prayer begins in verse 20 in a typical fashion, in the same way that the previous prayer in the first lament began. The only difference is that, whereas in the first lament the prayer was clothed with imprecatory aspects, in the second lament the prayer is imbued with accusative language. However, in both laments, the prayer begins in verse 20 in the same typical fashion. They all end with a firm hope that God is going to answer accordingly. Hope in the first lament is explicitly conveyed in the imprecations, whereas in the second lament, hope is implied in the accusative prayer.

### Lamentations 3

From a concentric perspective, Lamentations 3 forms the heart of the laments. It has 66 verses, in which the alphabetic acrostics are arranged in such a way that each alphabet covers three verses. This is different from the previous two laments, where each alphabet covers a verse. The concentric approach therefore argues that, since Chapter One is 22 verses, chapter two 22 verses, chapter three 66 verses, chapter four 22 verses, and chapter five 22 verses, a chiasm is therefore formed.



Although traditionally it has been widely accepted that this central poem forms the heart of all the poems, there has also been a negative reaction to this elevation of lamentations 3. Provan (1991:84), for instance, disputes the long-held belief that this central poem offers triumph of faith over despair. Instead, Provan (1991:84) argues that this poem is just an interim report on a continuous battle. Reading this as an interim report of a continuous battle translates to a linear reading, which is the thrust of this paper.

<sup>21</sup> Pratico & Van Pelt, 2007:309–310

<sup>22</sup> Holladay, 1988: 331

Another notable missing literary device is the איכה formulae. Thus, Lamentations one, two and four all have the איכה formulae but chapters three<sup>23</sup> and five do not. Since the איכה formulae are understood to reinforce the dirge aspect of the laments, its omission may signal reduction of the dirge aspect.

Lastly there has been a lot of discussion on the presence of the *qinah* meter. Hillers (1992:18) concludes alongside Budde (1882) that the *qinah* meter is more dominant in Chapter Three than in other chapters. This may mean that the loss of the איכה formulae has been compensated by the *qinah* meter in order to maintain the tone of the grief process.

Lamentation 3 starts off by an introduction of the גבר, who says that he has seen affliction by the rod of God's wrath. He recounts how God turned against him to the extent that he doesn't heed his prayers. From verses 2 to 16, most of the verbs are in the third person singular, giving details of what God had done. He then switches to the first person singular from verses 17 to 21. In verses 21 to 23 he speaks about God's loving kindness and mercies. He uses the first person common plural to declare that the survivors are not completely destroyed only because of God's loving kindness and mercies. Verse 24 lays bare the internal reflections of the גבר. The use of the word אמר (verses 18 and 24) and nouns לב (verse 21) נפש (verse 20, 24) ראש (verse 19) intensify the inner dialogue. The internal reflections may have emanated from the struggle between the desire to protest and to submit to God.

In verse 24, he declares that he will wait for the Lord. The Hebrew word used for wait is יחל. The root word יחל is used several times in this poem; most notably in verses 18, 21, 24 and 26. Salters (2014:229) notes that the word יחל is in the same semantic field as קוה. Depending on the stem attached, the word יחל basically means waiting with a firm hope on something/someone<sup>24</sup>. The other word that falls in the same semantic domain with יחל as noted above is קוה. It is used in verse 25. The NIV translates לקוה<sup>25</sup> as 'to those whose hope is in him!'. Another thing to note is that קוה is used to interject a possible continuous use of יחל, which is found in verses 24 and 26. Although קוה is used to separate a continuous use of יחל, verses 25 and 26 are semantically joined together by the use of טוב. Parry (2010:102) therefore concludes well that verses 24 to 26 "envisage a situation where salvation has not arrived but can be confidently expected in the future."

Another important literary device to note in verses 22 to 32 is the inclusion that is formed by the use of the words חסד and רחם. The two words open and close the section so that, at the heart of the middle chapter, the חסד and רחמים of God becomes the driving force that generates and propels the גבר to hope in God. Hillers (1992:128) avers and adds that the חסד and רחמים of God are "not a passing phase in God but an enduring part of his nature, always being renewed toward mankind." Through the chiasm of verse 22, Wright highlights that this character of God is as eternal as God himself. A number of scholars are agreed that this section, and perhaps beginning in verse 19, is reminiscent of the wisdom literature. For example, Goldingay (2021:137) links this section to Psalm 42 to 44. It is reiterated again that this section expounds the theodicy of God. However,

<sup>23</sup> Although some have argued that in Chapter 3 there is the alternative אָ in verse 3, most scholars agree that it does not take a prominent position as in Chapters 1, 2 and 4.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, Driver & Briggs, 1951:403–404

<sup>25</sup> But as can be seen, the noun קוה is used in its *qal* participle form. The participle is then attached to a preposition ל and a 3<sup>rd</sup> masculine singular pronominal suffix י.

this did not come about easily, as it had to go through the *antitheodicy* of Chapters 1 and 2. Even in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, the גבר will still revisit the agony in verse 48. Wright (2015:104) therefore concludes that this counter balancing of the two vast realities is important, as it offers an opportunity to question and protest against God but also realise his incomparable eternal love. To sum up, apart from the imprecations, hope in Lamentations 3 is expressed through the use of four key words: יהל , קוה , חסד , רחם and רחם.

In line with the goal of this paper that seeks to look at the linear reading of the text, I quickly shift attention to the concluding verses (i.e., verses 55–66) of the lament. These verses stand on the heels of verses 51–54. In verses 51–54, the גבר recounts an occasion when he nearly died; however, he called on the Lord and God heard him. On the basis of this previous deliverance, he is convinced God will hear. Parry (2010:119) observes that this final section (i.e. verses 52 to 66) in general is similar to 3:1–18. Thus, Lamentations concludes the way it begins: with the גבר telling his story. However, some of the differences between the beginning and the end have been necessitated by 3:22–24. The loving kindness and the mercies of God have changed the attitude of the גבר. Whereas in the first section he referred to God as an enemy, in the concluding section he refers to God as a saviour who can deliver from enemies.

There are a number of glaring series of verbs that are used in the perfect conjugation from verses 55 to 62. Salters (2014:266) admits that scholars are divided on how to read and understand these perfects. Three possibilities are suggested. Firstly, they can be read in the past. Secondly, they can be read in the present. And thirdly, they can be read as precative. The precative use of the perfect is where the author uses a perfect or *qatal* to express a realisable wish (Van der Merwe, Naudé & Kroeze, 2017:160). Hillers (1992:78) notes that, besides Lamentations 3:55–62, the precative use of the perfect is also found in 1:21 and 4:22. As in 1:21, it is better to take the perfects in 3:55 to 62 and 4:22 as precative. Thus, the prayer is given in the perfect, as a wish that is realisable. It is therefore a hopeful prayer.

Wright (2015:126) notes that verses 55 to 59 echo salvation psalms that move from 'I called... you heard... you came... you redeemed....' Special attention should be given to the only words uttered by God in the whole book of Lamentations, 'אל-תירא' (do not fear). In addition to previous deliverance experiences, this affirmation of God's presence in the words 'do not fear' gives the גבר more confidence to intercede for lady Jerusalem. Thus, as the proper imprecations are uttered, there is renewed hope that God is certainly going to answer.

The proper imprecations within the prayer begin from verses 59 to 66. The poet first acknowledges God's omniscience by the use of the verb ראה, which means that God has seen and knows what has happened to the גבר. So if God has seen and knows, deliverance is at hand (Parry, 2010:122). Again, based on past actions of deliverance, the גבר now faces the present situation "with a growing confidence that God will complete what he has started" (Parry, 2010:125).

Verse 59 seems to be more general in its use of the Hebrew word עוותי, which comes from the root עוה. Although the King James Version translates it as 'subversion', most translations, such as the NIV, the NJB and RSV, prefer to translate it as a phrase 'the wrong done to me', which is more general than specific. However, it becomes more specific in verses 60 and 61. Verse 60 specifically picks up the vengeance aspect with its use of נקמתם from the root נקמה, and verse 61 focuses on their insults חרפתם. On the

issue of vengeance or the use of the Hebrew word *בַּקְמָה*, Salters (2014:273) notes that the word is not used elsewhere in the book of Lamentations. Salters (2014:273) and Renkema (1998:458) therefore suggest that the enemies that are vengeful are the Edomites rather than the Babylonians. This therefore connects well this pericope to Chapter 4:21–22, where the Edomites are explicitly stated as the enemy that rejoiced at the fall of daughter Zion.

In addition to the insults, the *גֹּבֵר* is concerned about the songs of the enemy that mock him. The word translated 'mock' comes from the Hebrew root *מִגְנִינָה*. There have been some efforts to emend this to *נִגְנִיתָם* so as to link it to 3:14. In any case the idea of mocking using songs is maintained. The idea of mocking is amplified by a merism (verse 63, 'sitting and standing').

Having outlined the actions of the enemy, the *גֹּבֵר* bursts out the curse. The curse is basically composed of three requests that emanate from the Hebrew *ת* consonant. First, he requests of God that he pay them back what they deserve. The controlling verb for the first request is *שׁוּב*. Second, he requests that a veil be put over their hearts. The controlling verb for the second request is *נָתַן*. This second request is further modified by the phrase 'may your curse be on them'. The word translated by the NIV as 'curse' is the Hebrew word *תְּאֵלָה*. This is a different word than the one that is regularly used in a similar passage, Psalm 109:17–20. The Psalmist in Psalm 109:17–20 frequently uses the synonym of *תְּאֵלָה*, which is *קָלְלָה*. *קָלְלָה* refer to both the action and the formulae of cursing, whereas *תְּאֵלָה* is used only in Lamentations 3:65. Because of its limited use, it is difficult to clearly define its meaning. Thus a number of scholars are content to just see it as referring to a curse<sup>26</sup>. The third request is expressed using the Hebrew verb *רָדַף*, which means "pursue". *רָדַף* is further modified by *שָׂמַד*, which means that God should not only pursue them, but should pursue and destroy them. Goldingay (2022:160) concludes that the poem closes in a typical fashion of a protest psalm, with a movement from an appeal to God to pay attention (verses 60–63) to an appeal for God to take action against the enemies. Certainly such a prayer closes with the hope that God will hear and act. As Parry (2010:126) observes, Lamentations 3 begins with the *גֹּבֵר* not being able to mention even God's name until 3:18. However, with the changed attitude and situation, the *גֹּבֵר* now ends this poem with God's name *יְהוָה*. This change of attitude may have been necessitated by the opportunity to protest, the ability to contemplate God's character, the affirmation and assurance from God not to fear, and the firm hope that God had heard and seen the affliction and would surely avenge the action of the enemies.

## Lamentations 4

Wright (2015:129) summarises Lamentations 4 as "It is finished", Hillers (1992:135) prefers to title the chapter "The limit of suffering", and Provan (1991:109) opts to focus on "In the streets". None of these titles seem to offer any glimpse of hope. However, as will be discovered later, this lament ends in a fashion typical of the psalms of lament:<sup>27</sup> with an imprecation against enemies as in Lamentation 1 and 3 indicating a hopeful ending.

<sup>26</sup> Some scholars have suggested an emendation that alters the positions of *ל* and *א*. In that case, instead of having *תְּאֵלָה*, it will be *תְּלֵאָה* which then refers to weariness, hardship or trouble, as used in Lamentations 3:5.

<sup>27</sup> Westermann (1994:207)

In terms of literary devices, there are several devices that link Lamentations 4 to the other laments. First it is the use of the *איכה*, which is prominent in Lamentations 1 and 2. However, unlike Lamentations 1 and 2 which use *איכה* only once in the first verse, Lamentations 4 repeats its use of *איכה* in verse 2. This shows that, although the three chapters begin the same way, Lamentations 4 may be intensifying the lament by its repetition of *איכה*.

Second, Lamentations 4 is similar to the preceding laments in that it continues the use of the alphabetic acrostics that began in Lamentations 1. However, as Hillers (1992:145) points out, in Lamentations 4 the stanzas are two lines long as opposed to the three-line stanzas in the previous poems. The alphabetic acrostics in Lamentations 4 should also be contrasted with those in Lamentations 3 in that, whereas Lamentations 3 uses the same letter in three lines, Lamentations 4 uses the letter in the first line as is the case with Lamentations 1 and 2 (Goldingay, 2022:163).

In terms of voices, Parry (2010:132) suggests that there are three voices in Lamentations 4. The first voice is that of the narrator, which covers 4:1–16. The second voice is that of the people of Jerusalem or the leaders, which covers 4:17–20. The third voice is that of a prophet or priest, which covers 4:21–22. However, Parry also admits that these three voices can be reduced to two, since the voice in 4:21–22 can be that of the narrator. This therefore suggests that the narrator's voice begins and concludes Lamentations 4. In between, the narrator's voice is interjected by Jerusalem's voice, which uses the 1<sup>st</sup> common plural. Thus, Goldingay (2022:163) is right to say that Lamentations 4 can be read as a two-hander: a first-person singular voice speaks about Zion in verses 1–16 and 21–22, and a first-person plural voice that speaks about 'us' in verses 17–20.

In terms of content, although the main focus of this article is on the imprecations, one needs to interrogate the content that leads to the imprecations. It is evident from the passage that there has been a long siege of Jerusalem, which has led to famine and starvation. Three groups of people are then presented with the graphic image of suffering. These groups are the fallen heroes, the females and their children (most vulnerable group) and lastly the priest and the elders (religious and civil leadership) (Westermann, 1994:198).

The issue of the maternal cannibalism is one aspect that connects Lamentations 4 with other laments, specifically Lamentations 2. In Lamentations 2:20, the issue is presented in a rhetorical question, whereas in Lamentations 4:10 the event is given in a narrative form. One moves with this image from its micro to macro level. In both Lamentations 2 (i.e. 2:2, 5) and 4 (i.e. 4:11) God is pictured as one who has swallowed Jacob's dwelling in his fierce anger. In other instances, God is portrayed as one who gave birth to Jacob and nursed him. Thus, God's relationship to Judah is historically that of a caring mother<sup>28</sup>. However, the mother has turned against her own children in the book of Lamentations (macro level). The Judean woman turning to cannibalism, therefore, draws down the image to its micro level. The image of cannibalism depicts one of the worst sufferings ever experienced. As Bosman (2012:152) argues, maternal cannibalism is the most horrendously extreme suffering that God has inflicted on the nation of Judah. Thus, the author of the book of Lamentations confronts God with one of the most severe

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<sup>28</sup> The picture is clearly illustrated in the Zionist texts.

punishments ever to be meted out to a nation. The poet of Lamentations 4 wraps this unfathomable issue of cannibalism with the words in verse 11, 'The Lord has given full vent to his wrath'. As Goldingay (2022:174) puts it, "what has happened is too much, unprecedented and beyond expression". God gave total expression of his wrath through maternal cannibalism. In this way, the reader is taken to the darkest and gloomiest picture that can ever be painted for the nation of Israel.

The section closes off by highlighting the hopelessness of the survivors as they look hopelessly for assistance from other former allies and from their king. Former allies cannot offer help. The king himself is not able to provide protection for his subjects as expected in his jurisdiction as king<sup>29</sup>. His inability to provide help is stressed in verse 20, where the words 'breath' and 'shadow' are used to denote the dependence and protection<sup>30</sup> offered by the king in the Ancient Near East. Hillers (1992:151) observes that the poet "deliberately uses somewhat exaggerated language in speaking of the king in order to sharpen the contrast between their hopes in the king and the bitter actuality." So desperate and gloomy has the poet portrayed the picture that it is understandable for the majority of scholars to conclude that there is no hope in the chapter.

However, after painting such a gloomy picture, the poet bursts into some hopeful imprecations to conclude the lament. So, in terms of structure, Lamentations 4 imitates Lamentations 1 and 3, which conclude with some imprecations. The imprecations come as a result of a thorough exposure of the suffering of the Judahites. But in the case of Lamentations 4, the imprecations may come as a surprise to many. The supposed abruptness has led scholars like Westermann (1994:205) to conclude that verses 17–20 are insertions that have displaced a few sections of the song of the lament.

The imprecations are focused on the daughter of Edom. They are presented in such a way as to expose the contrast between the daughter of Edom the daughter of Judah. Thus, the Hebrew word בַּת (daughter) provides the crucial link and contrast between victims by the author. The imprecations ironically exhort daughter Edom to rejoice and be glad for the fall of daughter Zion. The Hebrew word translated 'rejoice' is שׂוֹשׁ, which means to exult or display joy<sup>31</sup>. The word שׂוֹשׁ also links 4:21 to 1:21, in both cases referring to the joy of the enemies of Judah<sup>32</sup>. In 4:21, שׂוֹשׁ is attached to שִׂמְחָה. The combination of שׂוֹשׁ and שִׂמְחָה is seen as a reinforcement<sup>33</sup> of the idea of joy and jubilation. The ironic exhortation to be joyful is reversed by a declaration that "to you also the cup will be passed; you will be drunk and stripped naked." The metaphor of a 'cup' as a symbol of judgment is well attested in the Hebrew bible. For example, in Jeremiah 25:15, there is a conceptual image of a cup full of wine of God's wrath which causes nations to stagger once they drink it. Salters (2014:335) avers that the cup refers to God's punishment in this context, but he adds that the aspect of it being passed around is derived from joyous celebrations. The metaphor of the cup is further given gravity by another image in the clause וְתִשְׁכְּרוּ וְתִגְדְּלוּ translated by the NIV as "you will be drunk and stripped naked." Although the image of being drunk and stripped naked has some roots in Genesis 9:20–

<sup>29</sup> According the Suzzerain-Vassal treaty, the king was expected to offer protection to his subjects and the subjects were expected to offer obedience.

<sup>30</sup> Provan (1991:122), Hillers (1992:151) and Salters (2014:331)

<sup>31</sup> Brown, Driver & Briggs (1951:965)

<sup>32</sup> Fabry (2004: 54).

<sup>33</sup> Salters (2014:333)

27, with emphasis on the shame and humiliation experience, in the context of Lamentations 4:21 it serves multiple purposes. First, it is to link this specific pericope to 1:8. Second, it is to expose the humiliation and shame that will be suffered by the Edomites the same way daughter Zion has suffered. Thus, Provan (1991:123) captures it well when he says, "Edom will suffer a reversal of her fortunes which will reduce her to the same shameful state as Zion."

The second part of the imprecation starts off with an assurance to Daughter Zion that her punishment has come to an end. It should be noted that scholars are not agreed as to the specific translation of the clause תם-עוֹנֶךָ. Salters (2014:337) prefers to translate this as, "your guilt has run its course/come to fruition" thereby effectively taking עוֹן as iniquity or guilt. However, looking at the immediate context of the cup that will be passed on to Edom and the entire lament, it is better to read this alongside the NIV and take it to mean 'punishment'. The verb תם should be connected retrospectively to the previous section (i.e. of Edom), where the contrast began. It should also be connected prospectively with the perfects of 22b. Ultimately, as Provan (1991:123) suggests, the perfects (verse 22) of this section and the imperfects of the previous section (verse 21) are to be taken as perfects of confidence expressing assurance of the future. The basic message is that Daughter Zion will certainly be delivered in as much as Daughter Edom will certainly be punished. Accordingly, Westermann (1994:206) captures it well when he states that "what 21b states metaphorically is repeated explicitly in v. 22b."

Parry (2010:132) observes that although some scholars<sup>34</sup> do not see hope in Lamentations 4, it is one of the most hopeful laments considering what is in 4:21–22<sup>35</sup>. Parry (2010:142) admits that "the shift from no-hope to confident-hope is so dramatic and unexpected that one is left disorientated." Parry (2010:142–143) then suggests that the confident hope could have been generated from the link between the King trapped in a pit (4:20) and the deliverance of the גֹּבֵר from the pit (3:53–58). Importantly, Parry (2010:132) advises that the deep darkness of 4:1–20 should not obscure the bright light of 4:21–22. In the same vein, the word of hope at the climax of the poem must not render the terrible plight and protest of the Judahites less dreadful or shocking. One has to move gradually with the poem from its darkest moments until the hopeful side. The admission to the hopeful end of the lament should not in any way undermine the terrible suffering of the Judeans.

In summary, it is undeniably clear that Lamentations 4 ends on a hopeful note. This hopeful note is presented in a form of an imprecation in the same manner as Lamentations 1 and 3. The hopeful note is arrived at after a thorough presentation and interrogation of the suffering of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This means that, in as much as there is protest, there is also assurance of hope. We also noted that there are a number of literary devices that link Lamentations 4 to the previous laments. These literary devices beckon the reader to see the laments as individual entities but also as a unitary whole.

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<sup>34</sup> For example Hens-Piazza (2017:59)

<sup>35</sup> Hillers (1992:153) hesitantly admits that these last verses have hope, saying, "it comes closer to being an expression of hope than almost anything else in the book". Even Provan (1991:123), who argues that there is no hope in Chapters 1 and 2, admits to hope in this pericope, saying, "it is clear that we have here the first and last real note of unfettered hope in the book."

## Lamentations 5

Lamentations 5 serves as a conclusion to the entire book of Lamentations. It also has some aspects that connect it to the previous laments. This basically means that it should be understood as a stand-alone poem but also linked to the rest of the book. There are notable literary devices that are missing in this final lament. First, the alphabetic acrostics are missing. Although this literary device is missing in the final lament, it is assumed by the use of the 22 verses.

Second, the *איכה* formula, which is used in Lamentations 1, 2, and 4, is missing. In Lamentations 3, we noted that although the alternate form *אך* is used, it is not given the prominent position that *איכה* receives in Lamentations 1, 2 and 4. We also noted that, unlike in Lamentations 1 and 2, where the *איכה* formulae are used only in the first verse, in Lamentations 4 it is repeated in verses 1 and 2. However, as one comes to Lamentations 5, the *איכה* is totally abandoned. It should be noted that the *איכה* formula is one of the literary devices that indicates a dirge. Hence, Gunkel (1929) classifies Lamentations 1, 2 and 4, where the *איכה* formula is prominent, as national funeral songs. This may indicate that flames of dirge become bigger at the beginning of Lamentations 4 and slowly die down in the latter parts of Lamentations 4. As one gets to Lamentations 5, it is totally extinguished. Thus, Lamentations 5 serves as the handkerchief that is wiping away all the tears with a stern anticipation that God has heard the cries and will certainly answer.

The third notable missing literary feature is the *qinah* meter / enjambment. The enjambment is intense in Lamentations 1 and 2 and decreases in Lamentations 3 and 4. It is totally abandoned in Lamentations 5 (Parry, 2010:10). Goldingay (2022:190) observes that rather than the limping meter, Lamentations 5 utilises the 3-3 rhythm. As the limping meter serves, to foster a hollow feeling within the reader, this missing component in Lamentations 5 may suggest again that the lamentation has come to an end, and slowly comes to normalcy with a 3-3 rhythm. The fact that Lamentation 5 serves as the conclusion is further supported by its length, which Parry (2010:146) observes as being half the length of chapter 4 and a third of the length of Chapters 1–3.

Lastly, and more importantly in line with the argument of this article, the imprecations at the end of the lament are missing. We noted that Lamentations 1, 3 and 4 all end with imprecations. However, Lamentations 2 and 5 do not end in imprecations. Since this is a significant deviation, these two laments may need an independent analysis. Thus, Lamentations 2 and 5 may need further research on their expression of hope or despair.

In summary, this therefore means that Lamentations 5 can be easily connected to Lamentations 3 because of the missing *איכה* formula. It can also be linked to Lamentations 2 because of the missing imprecations at the end. It can be connected to the rest of the laments through the implied alphabetic acrostics.

In terms of classification, Westermann (1994), Hillers (1992), Parry (2010) and Salters (2014) are all agreed that Lamentations 5 is a communal lament. Gottwald (1954:34) goes further, suggesting that the entire book of Lamentations is primarily a national lament with incidentals of a dirge and an individual lament. As a communal lament, it is therefore expected to exhibit the following structure that characterises all communal laments:

1. Invocation of God's name, which forms the opening address (such as 'Oh LORD')
2. Description of the distress or suffering (the lament or complaint proper)
3. Plea or petition for God's response, often accompanied by reasons for God to hear and act. (Some may include an acknowledgement of guilt or a claim of innocence)<sup>36</sup>
4. Profession of trust or confidence in God<sup>37</sup>
5. Promise or vow to praise God or to offer a sacrifice<sup>38</sup>

Although this is the general pattern, McCann (1996:647) notes that each communal lament may exhibit other unique features.

In terms of content, Lamentations 5 is the most debatable lament within the book of Lamentations. The biggest contention centres on the existence of hope. For example, Provan (1991:124) contends that the hope expressed at the end of Chapter 4 is not found in Chapter 5. In the same vein, Hens-Piazza (1989:76) argues that the omission of the praise aspect that characterises most communal laments is an indication of accelerating despair in the poem<sup>39</sup>. Hillers (1992:165) takes a cautious approach, saying that the poem ends not in despair but in sobriety. Other scholars, such as Middlemas (2021), distinguish the form and the content. In the end, Middlemas concludes that there is no hope communicated by the content but hope is expressed through the form of the communal lament. On the positive side of things, Parry (2010) and Wright (2015) argue that Lamentations 5 takes the reader through pain and suffering, landing on a solid hope. The various opposing views have led Joyce and Lipton (2013:191) to conclude that it is the book's ability to accommodate diverse approaches, such as optimism, pessimism and agnosticism, which explain its enduring significance.

However, a closer look at the book reveals that the lament begins in a typical prayer fashion and closes as such. Thus, verses 1, 21 and 22 should be read with the same lenses. So the NIV and the KJV are right to translate זכר יהוה with a vocative aspect, "Remember O LORD". Westermann (1994:213) highlights that the fronting of a direct address to God is a feature of psalms of petition rather than a dirge. The feature of a petition is given more prominence in Lamentations 5 than in any other lament. This may explain why the אִיכָה, which is a strong feature of the dirge is missing in Lamentations 5. The KJV and the NIV are consistently applying the vocative aspect even when it comes to verse 21. Thus, in verse 21 the KJV and the NIV translate הֲשִׁיבֵנו יְהוָה אֵלֵינוּ as "Turn thou us unto thee Oh LORD" and "Restore us to yourself Oh LORD" respectively. This, therefore, means that the writer intentionally begins the lament in a prayerful tone and ends it that way. Thus, the אִיכָה formulae, which characterise previous laments, have been substituted by the vocative in Lamentations 5. This indicates that the author has intentionally moved from a dirge to a prayerful tone. The use of the vocative at the beginning and at the end of the lament ultimately creates a literary feature of inclusion.

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<sup>36</sup> Bergant (2015:897)

<sup>37</sup> McCann (1996:647) highlights that the communal laments frequently include a reminder of God's historical relationship with his people and his mighty deeds on behalf of them.

<sup>38</sup> McCann (1996:644–645)

<sup>39</sup> Linafelt (2000) is also in the group that argues that Lamentations 5 does not end on a hopeful note.

That the lament begins and ends in a prayer is affirmed by a number of scholars<sup>40</sup>. For example, Parry (2010:146) notes that verse 1 is a plea and verses 19 to 22 are an appeal. Salters (2014:341) goes a step further and observes that God is specifically addressed in verses 1 and 19–22 with the imperatives that form the inclusion that sets the tone for the entire lament. Goldingay (2022:206) rightly concludes that verse 21 returns to verse 1 in terms of its use of imperatives and invocation of God. This means that, whereas all the other laments conclude with a prayer in the form of imprecations, Lamentations 5 is meant to be seen as a prayer in its entirety. This is possibly why a few Greek and Latin manuscripts have titled the lament as a prayer<sup>41</sup>. Accordingly, scholars, such as Hillers (1992), Berlin (2002) and Dobbs-Allsopp (2002), continue to view Lamentations 5 as a prayer.

Having encircled the lament with a prayerful tone, the author goes on to outline the hardships suffered by the various groups of people<sup>42</sup>, their penitence<sup>43</sup> and finally the state of the location where the temple once stood, which is now inhabited by jackals<sup>44</sup> (Salters, 2014:339–340).

Westermann (1994:212) sees verse 19 as a word of praise in place of the normal avowal of confidence, which is an expected aspect of communal laments. However, Provan (1991:133) is of the opinion that the complaint of verse 19 lays the foundation for the petition. The remembrance of past events opens the way for contemplation of the nature of God. The words in Lamentations 5:19 find some resemblance with Psalm 102:12. Stek (1984:893) observes that in the case of Psalm 102, the entire section from verses 12 to 17 signifies assurance that the eternal king will surely hear the prayer and restore Zion. Thus, because God reigns forever, his mercies to those who look to him for salvation will always be granted (Stek, 1984:893). So rather than praise as suggested by Westermann, verse 19 is in fact an avowal of confidence in line with other communal laments. The praise aspect is omitted. And once the confident hope in the salvation of the sovereign God has been established, it is difficult to imagine how the poet can slide back into despair.

In verse 19, the poet admits to the eternal reign of God. The poet employs two phrases to express the everlasting dominion of God. First, it is *אתה יהוה לעולם לעולם*, which can best be translated as "You Oh God are from eternity to eternity". Berlin (2002:125) and Hillers (1992:160) make clear the point that the fronting of the independent pronoun *אתה* is meant to bring a contrast to what has been said earlier. Thus, although the temple has been destroyed and Mount Zion inhabited by jackals, God still exists. His existence is not dependent on the physical presence of Mount Zion or the temple.

Second, *תשב כסאך לדר דור ודור* is best translated as "Your seat will dwell/ dwells for generations and generations". Although there is disagreement amongst scholars as to the exact intended meaning of *תשב*, Salters' (2014:369) suggestion that it be read as the rule

<sup>40</sup> Although Westermann (1994:211) does not specifically label this as a prayer but rather as a communal lament, he admits that the elements of lament are framed by element of petition in verses 1 and 21. These are pleas to take heed and to take action.

<sup>41</sup> Provan (1991:125) nonetheless notes that this is not reflected in the Masoretic Texts.

<sup>42</sup> The various groups that include the women, the princes, elders, young men

<sup>43</sup> Verses 6 and 16

<sup>44</sup> Verse 18

of God over all generations is most appealing. Combined with the first part of the verse, therefore, it refers to God's eternal existence and eternal dominion.

In verses 20–22 the poet's main concern is the restoration of Judah's fortune. The subject of restoration is first introduced by what seems to be an accusation against God: that he has forgotten his own. The fronting of the *למה* makes the question more potent. Salters (2014:370) observes that although *למה* is frequently used in lament psalms, this is the only passage where it is directly addressed to God. The aspect of forgetting (*שכח*) should be understood with its antinomy, remember (*זכר*), in verse 1. Thus, as *זכר* was understood as a call for action, *שכח* can be understood to refer to the inaction of God. Salters (2014:371) and Parry (2010:154) are right to connect the inaction of God as contrary to his established covenantal relationship with his people. This covenantal relationship obligates God to act on behalf of his people. Thus, based on the covenant, the poet has every right to expect deliverance from God. Judah has an everlasting covenant with God. This God is sovereign and his throne is eternal. Yet the poet is baffled by the fact that this God doesn't do anything concerning Judah's situation.

Verse 21 is controlled by imperatives of request<sup>45</sup>. This might be the reason why Salters (2014:71) thinks it is the crux of the prayer. The first imperative is given in the *hifil* from the root word *שוב*. The second is given in the *piel* from the root word *חדש*. Although some scholars want to see the restoration as confined to the spiritual, looking at the first part and the second part of the verse together, it is better to see it holistically encompassing the material and spiritual dimension<sup>46</sup> as in restoration from exile<sup>47</sup>. Thus the author might be thinking of a change of heart and change of fortunes in line with Jeremiah 31:18, 33–34.

Verse 22 has been a bone of contention for scholars, which has the potential to affect the whole theology of the book and its relationship to all other Old Testament books. A lot of energy has been exerted on this one verse, at times totally neglecting to relate it to the whole book and other lament psalms. The debate is reduced to the exact meaning of *כי אים*, at times without relating it to the context.

Hillers (1992:160) outlines the various meanings of *כי אים*:

1. For if
2. Unless
3. Or
4. But

Although Hillers (1992:160) admits that many scholars prefer to translate *כי אים* as 'unless', he adopts an adversative 'but'. However, the main objection that has been raised for the 'But' translation is that there is no negative statement prior to verse 22.

Gordis (1974:290) advocates the translation of *כי אים* as "even if" or "although". Accordingly, the entire verse would therefore read "Turn us to yourself O LORD and we

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<sup>45</sup> Lee (2002:194) prefers to call them "typical imperative pleas"

<sup>46</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp (2002:146) is also of the view that the restoration of the relationship will encompass the material and spiritual

<sup>47</sup> Salters (2014:372)

shall return; renew our days as of old, even though you had despised us greatly and were very angry with us".

Another recent way of looking at the  $\text{כִּי אִם}$  has been proposed by Linafelt<sup>48</sup>. Linafelt modifies the traditional rendering of 'For if' or 'But if' and believes that it is a protasis of a conditional clause without an apodosis. This would mean that "the book is left opening out into the expectation of God's non-response." (Salters, 2014:374). Berlin (2002:126) objects to Linafelt's interpretation, saying that, although it may resonate well with the modern reader, since it is modern, it may not have resonated with the ancient author.

Although scholarly efforts to understand the translation and meaning of  $\text{כִּי אִם}$  can be appreciated, it is nevertheless inappropriate to determine whether the laments end on a positive or negative note based on the understanding of  $\text{כִּי אִם}$  alone. Rather, more effort should be put into linking the entire verse and the preceding ones to the general tone of Lamentations 5 as a whole. Thus, as most scholars<sup>49</sup> are agreed that Lamentations 5 is a prayer, emphasis should be put on the understanding of a prayer. In the same vein as Goldingay (2022:209), "prayers as prayers do not incorporate responses." However, in line with Grant (2007:10) and Parry (2010:154) the bare fact that this is a prayer, a cry to God, is indicative of hope in the one who is sovereign and is able to enact his will. Wright (2015:164) concludes that there is no contradiction between crying in protest to God and believing that God will ultimately hear and deliver based on his character and historical actions.

In conclusion, we have established that Lamentations 5 is fashioned in the form of prayer. For the community of faith, prayer is never a hopeless endeavour but recognition of one's inability to rescue themselves from the situation they find themselves in and, hence, an appeal to somebody with greater power than themselves to rescue them. Such appeals are made with confidence based on previous acts of deliverance from the one they are made to. However it should be noted that the sovereignty aspect of God includes his ability to afflict and deliver from perils.

The missing imprecations at the end of Lamentations 5 show significant deviation from the normal pattern of ending the laments. This certainly calls for further research on how such laments foster hope or despair. However, preliminary observations show that Lamentation 5 concludes with a prayerful tone that focuses on the sovereign God. The shift to focusing on God rather than on enemies reinforces the change of attitude and realisation that only God is able to deliver. Such a conclusion is fitting, as it not only concludes Lamentations 5 but also binds together and concludes all the laments. Thus, the prayers end by laying everything in the hands of the one who caused the suffering and is the only source of deliverance.

## Conclusion

This article presents the linear reading of Lamentations as an alternative way of approaching the book. The author notes that Lamentations 1 to 5 all have a prayerful tone at the end, introduced mainly by the vocative  $\text{יְהוָה}$ . In addition to the prayerful tone, the author highlights that Lamentations 1, 3 and 4 all end in imprecations. These imprecations suggest a hopeful ending. It has been established that Lamentations 2 and

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<sup>48</sup> 2000:60

<sup>49</sup> Berlin (2002), Dobbs-Allsopp (2002) Wright (2015) and Hens- Piazza (2017)



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