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THE UNITY OF LAMENTATIONS

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A number of features in Lamentations support the view that the five individual chapters belong together. However, as early as the ancient Versions, there is an awareness that the genre is not the same throughout, and that the assumed unity needs some qualification. The phenomenon of the imitation of some features, seen in the Tisha b'ab prayers, was probably at work as the book took shape.

Is the book of Lamentations a unit in the way the Book of Ruth or Song of Songs are units, or is it like the Book of Psalms, a collection of pieces each of which had an originally independent existence?

While the book was believed to be the work of Jeremiah, the question of unity was not of great interest to a commentator, but once scholars could shake off the fetters of that tradition the way was open to subject the book to thorough investigation. And, strange as it may seem, they are not all in agreement!

But while the abandonment of the view that Jeremiah was the author did change the attitude towards unity and integrity, some translators and commentators, within the history of interpretation, were already aware that it was not all of a piece, that there was diversity here. The superscription in the LXX

καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τὸ αἰχμαλωτισθῆναι τὸν Ισραηλ καὶ Ιερουσαλημ ἐρημωθῆναι ἐκάθισεν Ιερεμιας κλαίων καὶ ἐθρήνησεν τὸν θρῆνον τοῦτον ἐπὶ Ιερουσαλημ καὶ εἶπεν

refers to τὸν θρῆνον τοῦτον "this lament"[1], and scholars have taken this to refer to the whole of the book, in spite of the fact that that the

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[1]Cf. Vulgate's superscription which refers to "lamentationem hanc"

title in both Versions is plural - *Θρηνοι* and *Lamentationes* - both of which may be interpreted as implying a plurality of a particular genre. The same could be said of the references to the book in Jewish literature where, in addition to the title איכה *echah*,[2] it is called[3] קינות *qinot*, i.e. a collection of the genre קינה *qinah*.

It is surely clear from this text that there are several units within the corpus; and the extent of them is confirmed in some MSS of the Peshitta where, after the title "Lamentations of Jeremiah", we get subtitles: First lament, second lament etc. Again, the Masoretic division of the text - where the paragraph marker פ *peh* is placed after each acrostic, is in accordance with the Peshitta divisions. When, in the 15th century, the Bible was divided into chapters, the divisions coincided with that of the Masoretes. Indeed, while one might detect divisions within the five chapters, the presence of the alphabetic acrostics ensured that Lamentations was the easiest book in the Bible to divide.

However, it is one thing to find that the text divides easily, and quite another to conclude that the various parts belong together. That there may have been some dispute as to the homogeneity of the five chapters is reflected already in the Versions, for while most Versions' titles tally with that of the LXX, i.e. Laments or *qinot*, the fifth poem, in Peshitta and Vulgate, is entitled "A Prayer of Jeremiah". This shows that some were of the opinion that not all the poems could be classified as *qinot*. It is important to note this.

In connection with unity we might also mention some remarks by Rashi. Rashi regards Jeremiah as the author of the book, but he says that it had originally contained three alphabetics והיו שלש אלף ביתות (which he identifies, by their first words, as chapters 1, 2 and 4), and that that book was burned by Jehoiakim. Later, there

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[2]The heading in many Hebrew MSS and in the Hebrew Bible.

[3]In *b. B. Bat. 14b*

were added three more alphabetics which he identifies as chapter 3 (the triple acrostic), adding the phrase, "three corresponds to three". It may be that Rashi is just giving a fanciful exegesis[4] of Jer 36:32 which reads: "Then Jeremiah took another roll and gave it to Baruch, the scribe, the son of Neriah; and he wrote in it from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim, king of Judah had burned in the fire; and *there were added to them many like words*"; but his comments lead us to the conclusion that he perceived some differences between the corpus comprising Chapters 1, 2 and 4, and Chapter 3. It is also interesting to note here that Rashi does not even mention Chapter 5!

At first glance Lamentations appears to be a self-contained document, being four complete alphabetic acrostics followed by a chapter of twenty-two verses all, possibly, with the historical background of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. But Chapter 5 differs from the rest of Lamentations in three important respects: a) it is not an acrostic (though it does have 22 lines). b) it has a different poetic metre (3/3 rather than 3/2). c) it resembles, *in form*, the communal laments in the Book of Psalms, whereas the others do not. It has even been suggested[5] that, while Chapters 1-4 originated shortly after 586 BCE, Chapter 5 comes from a period as late as the Maccabees.

As I have already noted, the difference between Chapter 5 and the other chapters was noticed at least as far back as the Peshitta Version. I suspect that this observation was based on the *form* of the poem rather than on the fact that it is not an acrostic and that its metre is different from that of the others. It does not, however, follow that a different form means a different origin in that, as some scholars argue, the final chapter, being a prayer, may round off the composition as a whole; but it occurred to me that an examination

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[4]A. J. Rosenberg, *The Five Megilloth*, Vol. II (New York: The Judaic Press, 1992), 1.

[5]S. A. Fries, "Parallele zwischen den Klageliedern Cap. IV, V und der Maccabäerzeit," *ZAW* 13 (1893): 110-124; S. T. Lachs, "The Date of LamentationsV." *JQR* n.s. 57 (1966-67): 48.

of the vocabulary employed by the authors would be enlightening, on the question of unity.

It would be surprising if, in comparing any poem in the Hebrew Bible with another in the same corpus, there was no overlap whatsoever. Hebrew has not such a vast vocabulary that a writer could compose even a small piece without drawing on words which crop up elsewhere time and again. Even if set the task of writing a poem and avoiding the vocabulary of another poem it would not be easy. Consequently, when we compare the vocabulary of the poems which comprise the Book of Lamentations, we should not be surprised if vocabulary in one poem is to be found in another, or throughout the book. While other arguments may be employed to support the unity of the book, one based on vocabulary - though important - should not be pushed too hard. And yet, while the vocabulary of, say, Chapter 1 is to be found in some of the other poems and vice versa, there are some observations which may be significant in this regard.

If we take Chapter 5, the poem highlighted by Peshitta and Vulgate as having a different genre from the other poems, and note its vocabulary, we find that it has very clear affinities with the previous poems. Indeed, we get the impression that the writer of Chapter 5 was drawing on the other poems for his material. This is so to such an extent that one can rule out the notion that Chapter 5 is a completely independent poem tacked on to the end of four acrostics. There are, of course, features which are unique to Chapter 5. It is the only chapter that mentions Egypt and Assyria, the only place where the invading enemy is referred to as strangers and foreigners, contains the only specific reference to the sins of the fathers; and there are some twenty other terms which are not found elsewhere in Lamentations. But given the fact that the *form* of Chapter 5 is quite unique in the book, it is remarkable how often the words used reflect previous chapters.

To begin with, 5:1 requests Yahweh to "remember", picking up the statement in 2:1 that Yahweh has *not* remembered, and requesting a reversal of that situation (cf. 5:20). The writer also beseeches Yahweh to "look and see", terminology which is an echo of

1:9,11,18, 20; 2:20; 3:63.

The root הפך (Niphal) is found at 1:20, and the Qal passive participle at 4:6. At v. 3 the phrase "like widows" brings to mind the simile at 1:1. The verb רדף used of the enemy pursuing at v. 5, is used in a similar fashion at 1:3, 6; 4:19. The word צואר (neck) is found also at 1:14. The verb חטא (to sin) at vv. 7, 16 reflects 1:8; 3:39. The noun עון (iniquity) at v. 7 is an echo of 2:14; 4:6, 13, 22. לחם is mentioned at vv. 6, 9 and also at 1:11; 4:4; and the reference to מדבר at v. 9 reflects its use at 4:19. Again, חרב (sword) at v. 9 seems to echo 1:20; 2:21; 4:9, as does רעב (famine) v. 10 which is referred to at 2:19; 4:9. The word אשה (woman) is mentioned at 2:20 and 4:10 as well as at 5:11; שר at 1:6; 2:2, 9 in addition to 5:12; זקן at 1:19; 2:10,21; 4:16 as well as at 5:12,14; נער at 2:21 and at 5:13; בחור at 1:15, 18; 2:21 and at 5:13, 14.

There are other examples, but enough have been listed to make it clear that Chapter 5 was not written in isolation but is closely connected with what precedes. Chapter 5 belongs in the Lamentations corpus.

Having said that, however, it should be noted that Chapter 5's relationship with Chapter 3 is anything but strong with regard to vocabulary. Most of the vocabulary of Chapter 5 is reflected in Chapters 1, 2 and 4; few words in Chapter 5 are echoed by Chapter 3.

If, as some have argued, Chapter 5 is the prayer which sums up the other poems, why does the author of Chapter 5 find little or no space for the vocabulary of Chapter 3? Could it be that the author of Chapter 5 did not have Chapter 3 to draw on?

This raises the question of the place of Chapter 3 in the corpus; and when one discovers that terms such as Zion, Jerusalem, Judah and Israel are absent from Chapter 3, the latter comes under further

suspicion. After all, are not all five chapters concerned with the Fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath?[6]

The fact that Chapters 1, 2 and 4 begin in identical fashion (with איכה), and that each stanza in these chapters begins with successive letters of the alphabet, would lead us to conclude that some kind of unity exists here; and when we find that Chapter 5 appears to be closely related to these poems, with regard to vocabulary, we are inclined to the view that Chapter 5 belongs here too; and that it was probably composed after Chapters 1, 2 and 4. The fact that the vocabulary of Chapter 3 is seldom reflected in Chapter 5 may lead us to the conclusion that Chapter 3 was the last poem to be written[7].

I am not arguing that Chapter 3 does not belong with the others. The fact that that it, too, is an alphabetic acrostic, though of a more intense variety than Chapters 1, 2 and 4, makes it likely that its home lies with them. Again, the metre employed in Chapter 3 matches that of the metre of 1, 2 and 4; and it does have other important links with those chapters: 3:48 "My eyes run with streams of water because of my people's downfall" is strikingly similar to 2:11 "My eyes are blinded with tears . . . . because of my people's downfall", the phrase "he bent his bow" occurs in both 2:4 and 3:12, while the suffix on עברתו 3:1 has no referent except one assumes the presence of another passage, such as 2:22.

The Jewish commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (587 BCE and 70 CE) takes place annually on the 9th of Ab. That it is a very ancient custom is confirmed by references to it in rabbinic writings *y. Šabb.* 16: 15c; *Lev. Rab.* 15:4. It would, however, seem strange if the commemoration of such momentous events should have begun as late as Talmudic times. It is more likely that mourning and lamentation for the destruction of

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[6]Perhaps not, but that is the traditional interpretation; cf. R. B. Salters, *Jonah and Lamentations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1994), 76-83.

[7]Cf. C. Westermann, *Lamentations,* Edinburgh: T & T Clark (1994), 193.

Jerusalem and the Temple will have begun shortly after 586 BCE in some form or other. Zech 7.3-5 refers to mourning and fasting in the 5th month (Ab) and implies that this had been customary for the previous seventy years. These allusions may indeed refer to an early commemoration of the Fall of Jerusalem. Central to this observance is the reading of the book of Lamentations, but afterwards there are many prayers, some called *qinot*, which have accumulated over the centuries[8]. These prayers often strike the same mood as that of Lamentations and indeed receive their inspiration from that text. The alphabetic structures seemed to appeal to author after author of those prayers, so that, for example, we have one where a first line may begin with a letter of the alphabet, and much more sophisticated ones where, for example, every stanza begins with the word *echah*, the first strophe of the first stanza has five *alephs*, the second strophe six *beths*; the first strophe of the second stanza has five *gimmels*, the second strophe six *daleths* etc. Another prayer has a double alphabetic form commencing with the first two words of each stanza. The first word is taken from the twenty-two verses of Lam 2, and the second is counter-alphabetical[9].

What has happened is that the material for commemorating the fall of Jerusalem has grown over the centuries, some of the vocabulary has been re-used, and the alphabetic acrostic has been imitated and intensified to a greater or lesser degree.

Although one cannot prove it, this quasi imitation was probably at work in the growth of the book of Lamentations. Beginning with Chapter 1, in itself a sophisticated composition and probably created for the 9th of Ab commemoration, Chapter 2 followed, imitating the metre, the mood and the acrostic pattern, but adding clear references

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[8]See A. Rosenfeld, *Tisha B'Ab Compendium*, (New York: The Judaica Press, 1986)

[9]i.e. the first word of the first line begins with an א and the second with a ת; the first word of the second line begins with a ב, and the second word with a ש .See Rosenfeld, *op. cit.* 96.

to the Temple. Chapter 4 then took up the same mood, metre and acrostic pattern, but varying it somewhat with a two-line stanza and a little more down to earth. It could be that these three poems are the work of one person, though it could be that the similarities are really the result of imitation, but they give the impression of having been written by a poet (or poets) who witnessed the scenes described. If these poems were written for the purpose of the commemoration of the Fall of Jerusalem, it may be that prayers were also offered. The prayer which we encounter at Chapter 5 may not, therefore, be as early as Chapters 1, 2 and 4, but here too we have semblance of imitation - the extensive use of the vocabulary of Chapters 1, 2 and 4 and the twenty-two lines, echoing the alphabetic acrostics of the other three chapters.

Finally, and at a later date - possibly after the restoration of the Temple in the 6th century BCE, the author of Chapter 3 composed his poem. Again, he imitated his predecessors in the area of metre and acrostic, outshining them in the latter. It may be that this author was the redactor of the book, as we have it. If so, the placing of this poem at the centre of the document may be his way of putting his stamp on the corpus. We should note that the characteristics of Chapters 1, 2 and 4, mixing features of *qinah* and prayer are absent from Chapter 3. We should also note that this author does not give the impression of having been an eye-witness to the aftermath of 586 BCE; indeed, he does not even mention Jerusalem, Zion, Judah or Israel! We should also note that the genre in Chapter 3 is not consistent: it begins and ends with individual lament style and incorporates bits of communal laments. But the really important difference is the section vv. 26-41 which is didactic in character. The author, focussing on personal suffering, calls for perseverance, confession of sins and return to God. It would seem from this section that he would frown upon the call to lament (2:18). We must remember that he was not tampering with scripture: he was, possibly, revising a piece of liturgy. He wanted to influence the service on the 9th of Ab towards a more philosophical approach to suffering. The Temple had been restored, after all, and the exile was over. He was of the opinion that the commemoration was unbalanced and that the subject of how to deal with suffering,

present suffering, was something to be addressed.

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