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Lamentations

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For Amy and Hannah . . .
and all my other faithful women friends on the journey

Contents

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentary
Bib	*Biblica*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
GPBS	Global Perspectives in Biblical Scholarship
HALOT	Koehler, L., and W. Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. Leiden, 1994-2000.
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society

JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
MT	Masoretic Text
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SymS	Symposium Series
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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Authors are not really the sole creators or originators of a written work. Instead, they are scribes for collective consciousness imprinting in their writing the fruits of conversations, cultural exposures, and the research of others that they have received and synthesized. Indeed, this book is certainly a collation of the ideas and influences of women and men who have gifted me with conversations, their writings, their friendships, and their stories. Some of them I know well, and their encouragement and interest in this work have provided steady support for its completion. The associate dean of my institution, Alison Benders; my colleague Lisa Fullam; and my dear friend Jill Marshall number among those whose regular inquiries about the project provided impetus for steady work on it. The generosity and willingness of those thirteen individuals who provided the Contributing Voices have added a richness and complexity to the work for which I am profoundly grateful. My admiration and gratitude extend also both to Barbara E. Reid, OP, editor of the Wisdom Commentary Series, for conceiving and designing this important project, and to Carol J. Dempsey, OP, for her gracious patience and painstaking work as volume editor of this piece. Others whom I want to thank I know less well or only indirectly from their works. The volumes on Lamentations by Kathleen O'Connor and Adele Berlin proved to be invaluable resources. They often gave me pause and made me wonder if there was anything else to add in excess of their own writings on Lamentations. The impact of their works is everywhere present

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Author's Introduction

"For These Things I Weep" (Lam 1:16a)

The Babylonian invasion and destruction of Jerusalem and its temple are well documented in the historical book of 2 Kings 24:8–25:21 and in an account in 2 Chronicles 36:5-21. Details of the siege have also been added by the biblical prophet Jeremiah (39:1-10) and even portrayed by the prophetic actions of Ezekiel (4:1-17), both of whom experienced these events. The book of Lamentations renders its own account of this devastation and its aftermath. Unlike previous accounts, however, Lamentations narrates this catastrophe neither by rehearsing the historical details of captured royal officials nor by relating which professionals were carried into exile or by offering a tally of the valuable items ransacked from the temple before its fiery destruction. The historical specificity that would identify dates, important persons, or even Babylon itself as the archenemy responsible for the destruction is glaringly absent from these poems. Instead, the poetry of Lamentations generates a different rendition. It registers and witnesses to this monumental disaster through the cries and emotional outpourings of those on the ground. The chaotic and confused sentiments of actual people struggling to survive impregnate these verses. Amid the surrounding upheaval, siege, and subsequent famine, the true rawness of human

suffering is etched in these poems and gives witness to the depths of human anguish. Both the cost of physical misery and the internal struggle resound in a choir of individual and communal voices echoing their efforts to endure. Bitter memories, theological crises, psychological confusion, and rock-bottom hopelessness saturate these poetic stanzas. Across Lamentations, candid human testimony memorializes this disastrous tragedy. As Francis Landy notes, Lamentations "marks with untampered immediacy, the focal calamity of the Bible, the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE."[1]

Yet the lack of historical specificity in Lamentations allows for a timelessness regarding the suffering it makes audible. Its vivid images speak beyond the events that prompted the composition of these laments. It externalizes the internal complexities of the suffering, victimization, and tribulations that have, regrettably, continued to unfold through human history.

Still, there is more to lament here than even the vastness of human loss or the calamity of timeless warfare etched in the poetics of this book. In Lamentations, the multiple voices that narrate unspeakable suffering and labor to make sense of the surrounding horror do so at women's expense. Thus, women are well advised to exercise caution as they open this book. For the negative portrait of women in Lamentations as well as their implied suffering and degradation summon further lament because of this book.

As Lamentations opens, an overarching metaphor that receives extended elaboration in Lamentations 1 and 2 personifies Jerusalem as a woman. The first poem begins with woman Jerusalem (referred throughout this work as "Woman Zion") sketched as a grieving widow (Lam 1:1-2). She has lost a husband, as well as all that is implied as a result of that loss in a patriarchal society. She lacks protection, economic support, and social identity. Immediately, bereavement, aloneness, and pity define Woman Zion. As the poem unfolds, however, so too does the metaphoric portrait of Jerusalem. This widow is further defined by the loss of her children who have been taken away (Lam 1:5d). Hence, she also registers as an abandoned mother. Her children are carried off by the enemy because she is unable to protect them (1:5). Consequently, her status as tragic victim shifts. She begins to be assigned responsibility for

1. Francis Landy, "Lamentations," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1987), 329, quoted in Adele Berlin, *Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1.

the calamity that has befallen her children, who symbolize the inhabitants of the city. By the fifth verse of the first poem, no question remains as to culpability for the unfolding catastrophe. Blame for the destruction of Jerusalem, yet to be narrated, is laid squarely upon Woman Zion. "The LORD has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions" (Lam 1:5c).

Now the metaphorical woman becomes more than a grieving widow or incapable mother. A backstory is crafted that rehearses her iniquity, stemming from a time when she was an unfaithful wife who had taken lovers (1:8-9). Infidelity, shame, and immorality complicate Woman Zion's portrait and function as explanation for the city's destruction. As a follow-up, a narrative of her rape, assault, and abandonment (1:10)—which borders on pornographic—thickens her metaphoric description. These degrading assertions bolster the mounting sentiments regarding her culpability. Lamentably, such elaborations reinforce enduring notions that women somehow bring this type of punishment on themselves and, as a result, deserve the kind of violence that Woman Zion/Jerusalem incurs.

Though this highly charged sexual imagery remains confined to Lamentations 1 and 2, there are enduring consequences. The lamentable portrait of Woman Zion in the opening of the book supplies the only image for readers, which is likely summoned in their imaginations each time Jerusalem or Zion is referenced throughout the text. Subtly, each reference to her prompts recall of the initial metaphoric presence of the iniquitous city woman who bears responsibility for all the suffering therein. For women, however, there is yet more to lament than the persistence of this demeaning metaphor. Actual women register as frequent victims of the destruction recorded here and are painted as central figures in some of the most explicit images of suffering in these poems.

As Lamentations discloses the destruction's record of victims, women's anguish is portrayed alongside that of men. Young girls and boys are carried off into captivity by enemy troops. Exposition regarding war practices suggests these young women likely suffered particular trauma, often in the form of sexual violation. Additionally, women—like men—are slaughtered without mercy (2:21), but given women's role in the domestic sphere, their deaths leave children behind, presumably abandoned. Women who survive in the city are described as mothers who become widows. Thus, the loss of much more than husbands, killed or taken in warfare, befalls them. Within the confines of Zion, women are raped (5:11), likely by enemy forces that have overtaken the urban

center. As the siege continues, famine wreaks havoc in the city. Now the depiction of women in their role as mothers serves as exponent of just how severe conditions have become. These mothers are not only unable to feed their starving children who are begging for food but also portrayed as caressing their dying infants against their dried-up breasts where these innocent ones should have been nourished. In the most graphic image of human travail, women's role shifts from that of victim to victimizer. As the siege continues and hunger grows more intense, the poetic verses disclose that compassionate mothers resort to boiling and eating their children. Here, the actions of women serve to narrate the utter loss of humanity prompted by this ongoing catastrophe. Mothers who have lost their maternal instinct symbolize the depravity that has warped the most elemental of relationships.

Jewish scholar Naomi Seidman has good reason to charge that Lamentations, because of its utter debasement of women, deserves to be excised from the canon.[2] Deryn Guest also argues that the negative power of the presiding metaphor is so detrimental for women that such texts warrant elimination from the tradition.[3] Indeed, the victimization of women portrayed here, as well as the depiction of Jerusalem as an immoral woman who gets what she deserves, are reprehensible. Lamentations portrays women as victims—victims of patriarchal society, of war, of a theological tradition, and of authors. Still, we have reason to claim this book as part of our religious heritage. Down through the ages, the representations of the Holocaust have been exhaustive. Whether in novels, paintings, movies, or plays, these various depictions have served as painful but necessary reminders of the inhumanity of which we humans are capable and the kinds of human mistreatment that must never happen again.[4] In a similar way, the preservation of this book gives notice of the biases, divisiveness, and misogynist attitudes regarding women, which even religious tradition is capable of promoting and which must be steadfastly resisted.

2. Naomi Seidman, "Burning the Book of Lamentations," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. C. Buchmann and C. Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 283.

3. Deryn Guest, "Hiding Behind the Naked Women in Lamentations: A Recriminative Response," *BibInt* 7 (1999): 413–48, at 444.

4. Kathleen M. O'Connor makes a similar observation regarding the library of testimony about the Holocaust and how "such truth telling becomes an act of survival"; see Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 5.

Yet, further justifications exist for claiming this book. Feminist interpretation of biblical texts not only exercises its prerogative by documenting the case against women, a prerogative already well exercised when it comes to Lamentations,[5] but also seeks to identify sources of strength and portraits of courageous resistance amid the rubble of misogynist landscapes. Hence, the interpretation that follows not only indicts the tradition for further victimizing women but also offers women who have been victimized or abused an occasion to join their voices with those of women who have gone before them. While it will offer unsettling glimpses of women's pain and suffering during the exile, it will also present Woman Zion as a courageous female voice who rises up from her victimization and boldly confronts an insolvent theology and its deity with the injustice of innocent suffering.

Literary Character

While the destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing consequences for its inhabitants remain the focus of all five chapters, each poem exists as a self-contained composition offering a unique perspective on these events.[6] Lamentations 1 fixes on Jerusalem in the immediate aftermath of the destruction. It narrates the grief, shame, and desolation now surrounding the once-glorious city. Lamentations 2 recounts the physical decimation as an act of divine rage. As God's anger is unleashed on the city, the chapter concludes with Woman Zion's anger unleashed toward God. Lamentations 3, often thought of as the centerpiece of the book, drafts in detail the tribulations of exile. This poem offers, according to some interpretations, the only glimpse of hope in the whole book, though it quickly fades by the chapter's end. Lamentations 4 chronicles the ongoing consequences of the siege and then paints some of the most graphic pictures of the resulting suffering and human degradation. Finally, Lamentations 5 fashions the community's prayer of petition to

5. See, for example, Carleen R. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations*, SemeiaSt 58 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007); Mark J. Boda, Carol Dempsey, and LeAnn Snow Flesher, eds., *Daughter Zion: Her Portrait, Her Response* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012); F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp and Tod Linafelt, "The Rape of Zion in Thr 1, 10," *ZAW* 113 (2001): 77–81; Guest, "Hiding Behind the Naked Women," 413–48.

6. For characterization of each chapter not only with a distinctive perspective but also with a distinctive tone, see also Berlin, *Lamentations*, 7.

God to restore the broken relationship. In a collective emotional appeal, the people of Jerusalem plead with the Lord to not turn away from them forever.

Despite being distinct in perspective, these five poems are united in form as each employs some variation of an acrostic structure to create an artistic bond between them. In an acrostic, each line or stanza begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from א, *aleph* to ת, *taw*. Hence, the first word of each of the three-line stanzas in Lamentations 1 and 2 begins with a successive alphabetic Hebrew letter.[7] Lamentations 3 continues this pattern in a more intensified form with the same alphabetical format, but with each successive letter introducing all three lines of each stanza. Lamentations 4 unfolds across two-line stanzas, each introduced by the successive alphabetic letter. Finally, Lamentations 5 appears at first glance to abandon the acrostic pattern, but its structure of twenty-two stanzas maintains the number of letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus, this final chapter indeed subtly participates in the artistry that unites the five poems.

Many scholars have noted that the acrostic pattern provides structural unity and coherence across these five chapters. The alphabetic framework establishes clear beginnings and endings that both separate the pieces but also join them together as belonging to one work. In its predictability, the acrostic form also helps to manage the unpredictable and precarious content narrated in these poems. It acts as a stabilizing force amid the disquiet and confusion of the suffering and loss made audible in the book. It provides order for the narrative of a world that seems out of control. The familiarity and successive order of its tight framework buffer the opposing ideas and contradictory sentiments that ricochet throughout these poems. Finally, predominance of the acrostic artistry suggests the intentionality with which these poems were fashioned. Nothing haphazard resides here. These carefully composed pieces, with their familiar frameworks, appear crafted to accommodate the complexity of suffering and the narrative of survival that unfold within. Still, such artistic intentionality by authors in a patriarchal context requires scrutiny in the hands of feminists. Leonard Shlain argues that the development of the alphabet caused a major shift in culture whereby the written word was

7. The order of the Hebrew letters פ, *pe*, and ע, *'ayin*, in chapters 2, 3, and 4 are reversed. Adele Berlin notes that this reversal "reflects an alternative order of the alphabet, also found in inscriptions dating from several centuries before 586 BCE at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and 'Izbet Sartah'" (ibid., 4).

favored over images.[8] "Whenever a culture elevates the written word at the expense of the image, patriarchy dominates. When the importance of the image supersedes the written word, feminine values and egalitarianism flourish."[9] Shlain ties the rise of linear rationality of the alphabetic to developing modes of comprehending reality that were masculine in character. These evolving capacities in turn functioned to suppress goddess worship in ancient Israel. Hence, this shift could indicate that the degradation and rejection of Woman Zion cohere with the excess of containment in the alphabetic acrostic poems of Lamentations. Further, Hugh Pyper notes that the transition from images to the written word "is at least suggestive that the repudiation of Zion is contained in so explicitly alphabetic a text, and that this structure is at its tightest in the third chapter, which most explicitly speaks in a male voice and looks to the male God."[10] Hence, while the predominance of the acrostic may serve to contain the chaotic content narrated in these poems, it may also work to constrain and obscure the feminine dimensions of the deity.

The book of Lamentations manifests elements of several different genres. A cry for help that opens Lamentations 1, 2, and 4, the call to mourn, the declaration of death, and the accompanying expressions of grief and bewilderment characteristic of the funeral dirge craft various contours of these poems. Features of the traditional lament, well documented in the biblical tradition, also permeate all of the chapters. The lament's characteristic complaint against enemies, circumstances, or even God, as well as the requisite cry for help, declaration of guilt, and petition for revenge against foes infuse these poems with the form and sentiment that coincide with the lament psalms. Finally, aspects of the city lament well documented in Sumerian texts also play a part in the composition of these five chapters.[11] The personification of Jerusalem as a woman, mother, and daughter in Lamentations 1 and 2 and a description of the ordeals and strife in Lamentations 3 and 4 manifest aspects of this particular form. That Lamentations features elements of several

8. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

9. Ibid., 7.

10. Hugh S. Pyper, "Reading Lamentations," *JSOT* 95 (2001): 62–63. I am indebted to Pyper's work for directing me to Shlain's research and its importance for assessing the acrostic from a feminist perspective.

11. For a survey of research on the relationship of the city laments to Lamentations, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BibOr 44 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 2–10.

genres enhances the rhetorical effectiveness derived from each. Rather than conforming to a rigid categorization of genre, Lamentations can be described as participating in a variety of genres in order to disclose the complexity of a whole community's experience of this focal calamity.[12]

Characteristic of biblical poetry, parallelism works to establish both connections and contrast between adjacent lines and stanzas. Repetition serves to emphasize themes. Poetic imagery points to the experiences that eclipse words. The question of meter remains a debated topic. Karl Budde titled the meter in Lamentations "*qinah*," from the Hebrew word for a lament. He noted that the *qinah* line was the dominant line in these poems, identified as a 3+2 rhythm existing primarily in Lamentations 1–4. In this format, the first stich of a line consists of three stresses. The second stich follows, consisting of just two stresses, as if "dying away in a lamenting fashion," as is characteristic of funeral dirges and death.[13] For example,

> He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
> And [he has] broken my bones. (Lam 3:4)

Translations often obscure the *qinah* meter, and scholars since Budde suggest that *qinah* is one of several meter types that reside here.

As Lamentations resounds with the community's witness to the destruction of Jerusalem, it hosts a variety of voices that narrate individuals' experiences. All these speakers are creations of the literary pieces and are not to be confused with the poet(s) who composed these laments. In Lamentations 1 and 2, an unnamed individual reports the destruction with the dispassionate demeanor of an objective reporter. He will be called an observer. In the second chapter, however, the human suffering he describes unmasks his composure, and he begins to admit his own suffering and struggle. In these first two chapters, this observer interacts with another character, introduced as Daughter Zion (1:6). This second speaker, Jerusalem personified, speaks as a weeping widow and

12. With Miriam J. Bier, *'Perhaps There Is Hope': Reading Lamentations as a Polyphony of Pain, Penitence, and Protest*, LHBOTS (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 8, who—citing Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12, and M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 106—aptly summarizes that texts do not so much belong to genres but participate in, move in and out of, and invoke aspects of a variety of genres.

13. See Budde's contributions as cited in Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations*, AB 7A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), xxxi.

mother, recounting the violence that has befallen both herself and her children. Dianne Bergant notes that characteristic of the patriarchal ethos in ancient Near Eastern societies, cities were often portrayed as women whose fertile terrain was protected by men. Literature described these ancient cities as mothers who enclosed their inhabitants in their walls to protect them,[14] but, as we shall see, a cultural understanding that portrays cities as mothers and the inhabitants as her children can have fatal consequences for women in a patriarchal setting.

Woman Zion does speak in these poems. Twice she responds to the observer in Lamentations 1 and has the last words in Lamentations 2. Thereafter, she is not heard from directly, though reference is still made to her. In Lamentations 3, a new voice is introduced, identified only as the "strong man."[15] He represents the noble male resident who might be assumed to rescue people from the aftermath of the havoc. Instead, he himself succumbs to the calamity and also speaks for the community with whom he suffers. In Lamentations 4, another observer steps into the limelight. Whether this reporting voice is the same voice heard in Lamentations 1 and 2 is not clear. This later observer's disposition seems distinct, and he sounds much more embroiled in the crisis along with the community who also speaks with him. Finally, Lamentations 5 belongs to the collective voice of the community. They are the denigrated and impoverished Judean remnant who have lost their king, their temple, and all that defined them as God's people.

Interspersed among these key speakers across the chapters are other voices. For example, onlookers who pass by Woman Zion utter mockery and degrading comments toward her. Enemies of the city are quoted as they deride the city and its inhabitants. Children starving in the streets are heard crying out to their mothers for food, and an occasional chorus of onlookers, peoples, and nations cries out against Woman Zion, charging her as guilty. Hence, these laments harbor a multitude of voices both within and outside the community, granting a wide view of the destruction of the city and the harrowing aftermath.

Throughout the entire book of Lamentations, the divine voice is glaringly absent. Though God is beseeched on several occasions, nowhere does the Lord respond. Amid all the voices narrating human suffering

14. Dianne Bergant, *Lamentations*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 15–16.

15. The NRSV translation used throughout this study does not carry the translation of the Hebrew גבר "strong man" but renders it "I am the one" (3:1). "Strong man," however, will be used here to better convey the character of this speaker.

and the various perspectives on the destruction of Jerusalem echoing in these poems, God remains utterly silent.

Authorship

A long history of tradition has ascribed the book of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah. The practice likely stemmed from the Septuagint, the oldest Greek version of the Old Testament, in which the book of Lamentations opens by identifying the work with this prophet. "And it came to pass after Israel had gone in captivity, and Jerusalem was laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament over Jerusalem and said . . ." (Lam 1:1 LXX). An even earlier text in Chronicles also points to Jeremiah as the likely author. "Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a custom in Israel; they are recorded in the Laments" (2 Chr 35:25). Though the Chronicler is not specific in assigning the laments in the book of Lamentations to the prophet, the citation has encouraged the tradition of the prophet's authorship. The references to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE do argue for a composition date around the time of the prophet's activity. In addition, the book of Jeremiah itself includes frequent lamentations in anticipation of the destruction.

Many irreconcilable differences in style and content between the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, however, have been noted. Claus Westermann's summary that the assignment of Lamentations to Jeremiah "has for all intents and purposes been abandoned" summarizes the current scholarly opinion on the matter,[16] and while the five poems within Lamentations are united by their acrostic form, most likely they emerged from several authors. The familiar practice of enlisting women as trained professional mourners (Jer 9:17-20; 2 Sam 1:24; Ezek 32:16-18) opens up the possibility that women may have had a role in their composition or in the circulation of these five laments among the community.[17] Moreover, the Masoretic text makes no reference to Jeremiah's authorship. Unlike its placement in the Christian Old Testament, Lamentations in the

16. Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 58.

17. Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Lamentations," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 278.

Jewish canon resides among the Megilloth (Festival scrolls), confirming a long tradition of their liturgical use for the community. Today, Jews continue to recite Lamentations on the ninth of Ab, remembering the two destructions of the temple—first in 587 BCE by the Babylonians and then in 60 CE by the Romans. Furthermore, because of their lack of historical specificity, these laments have a timelessness that enables them to have relevance throughout Jewish history up to the Holocaust. The recitation of portions of Lamentations by some Christian communities each year during their Holy Week liturgies testifies further to their enduring relevance.

Index of Subjects