

Theology of Lamentations

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OT theologians have often noted with some frustration that Lamentations does not easily fit into a theological grid, even one supposedly derived from within the OT itself. Dobbs-Allsopp's comment is reflective of the situation.

“. . . the theology of Lamentations is occasional, pluralistic, equivocating, and fragmentary. Nowhere are there specific themes systematically developed or theological arguments set out in detail, and the poems steadfastly resist all attempts to superimpose on them a single unifying theological perspective. As such these poems' theology is hard to outline and summarize without giving a false impression.”

I sympathize with this perspective, but I also fear that we give up too easily. The reason for the difficulty in synthesizing a theology of Lamentations is that the poet was not primarily interested in doing theology. His purpose is to grieve and to help his people grieve, to give expression to a pain too deep for the prosaic vocabulary of everyday language, in the hope that his words, as inadequate as they may be, might open the door to healing.

This is not to say that Lamentation has no theology but that its theology is implicit and lies beneath the surface of a rich, complicated, and multi-layered lament. I would like to suggest a three-part approach to understanding the theology underlying Lamentation's profound expression of grief. First, we must appreciate the significance of the book's acrostic structure. What unifies Lamentations is not so much a theological theme or perspective but the dominance of the alphabetic form that shapes the poet's grief. This form is itself profoundly theological.

Second, we must discern the multiple themes that repeatedly emerge in the expressions of grief. A number of related themes run through the book that support the unity suggested by the acrostic structure. Once each has been understood in its own right, we can proceed to consider their interrelationships.

Third, we must focus on the climactic function of chapter 3 with its intensified acrostic structure to see how its content provides something of a center for the book as a whole. What we should be looking for here is not a neat theological package but the articulation of a crisis of faith that simultaneously reaches for and recoils from YHWH.

The Acrostic Structure: The Unraveling of Torah

To express such chaotic emotions as those provoked by Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BCE in such a tight and ordered format creates considerable cognitive dissonance for the reader. Lamentations

contains the only laments expressed in this form. Four of the five poems in the book are arranged alphabetically.

The first two acrostics begin the first word of each two-lined stanza with successive letters of the alphabet (the first using the traditional order of the Hebrew alphabet and the rest using the order corresponding to that found at Kuntillet Ajrud, Izbet Sarta, and Tel Zayit)¹ for a total of 44 lines each. The third begins the first word of each line with successive letters of the alphabet for a total of 66 lines each. The fourth reverts back to the pattern of the first two and the fifth poem abandons the acrostic form altogether.

The acrostic form conveys completeness and orderliness, normally in reference to Torah as evident in the Bible's most elaborate acrostic, Psalm 119. But why would one choose a structure that communicates orderliness to express the chaos of Jerusalem's destruction? The rabbis suggested the following connection: "Why is the Book of Lamentations composed as an alphabetic acrostic? . . . R. Judah said: Because it is written, *Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law* (Dan ix, 11), which is written from alef to tau; therefore is this Book composed as an alphabetic acrostic, one corresponding to the other."²

The Rabbis were not wrong to see a connection between the acrostic structure of Lamentation and the theme of Torah. But what is that connection? Actually, a comparison of the structure with the book's content suggests at least three possible connections. First, the acrostic structure may be intended to reflect the Israel's complete breach of covenant, from "A" to "Z" (1:8-9, 18; 3:34-39; 4:13-15). Second, it may be intended to convey the thoroughness and exactness with which YHWH carried out the covenant curses, especially in the intensified acrostic in chapter 3 (2:5; 2:20; 3:15; 4:11). YHWH applied every conceivable covenant curse as punishment on Judah from "A" to "Z." Third, the use of the acrostic could be an ironic rhetorical device highlighting the ultimate unraveling of Torah through Israel's disobedience and destruction (2:9).

Altogether the impression one gets is that disorderly conduct results in orderly judgment that brings a disordered existence – a kind of *lex talionis* punishment. The structure brilliantly holds in tension the orderliness of the covenant curses and the disorder that the curses bring. It is God's order

¹ Two orders of the Hebrew alphabet are attested. The older order represented by the abecedaries found at Izbet Sarta, Tel Zayit, and on the pithos at Kuntillet Ajrud place the letter ט before the letter ן. The later and more familiar order places the letter ן before the letter ט. Lamentations 1 conforms to the latter arrangement while Lamentations 2 - 4 conform to the former arrangement. Cf. Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 129.

² A. Cohen, *Midrash Rabbah, Lamentations* (London: Soncino, 1938), 87 cited in Adele Berlin, *Lamentations* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 4, n. 6.

per Torah to punish Israel's disorder resulting in an ultimate loss of Torah altogether (signaled by the abandonment of the acrostic and the express statement of 2:9,14)

Another possible function of the acrostic structure of the first four poems in Lamentations is that it encourages a complete catharsis of Judah's overwhelming grief. The requirement of beginning each stanza with a successive letter of the alphabet forces the poet and all those who repeat his words in worship to itemize their grief, to name in vivid detail every aspect of their sorrow. Such a tangled mess of emotions leaves the sufferer at a loss as to where to begin processing and expressing the disorientation of a crisis of this magnitude. The acrostic suggests a place to begin – with the first letter of the alphabet. From there the emotions begin to flow apace.

Furthermore, the acrostic structure suggests the poet's defiant affirmation of order in the midst of disorder as a way of submitting experience to revelation (cf. 3:19-33). Experience is not denied but neither is it made the final arbiter of truth. Experience is held in tension with the divine word until experience yields to the word. The word is capable of both accounting for Israel's unbearable suffering and giving her grounds for future hope, but God's word, rather than her experience of suffering, must be allowed to have the final say. This word enables Israel to submit to YHWH's chastisement via human agents recognizing that his anger, however fierce it may be, is temporary, but his steadfast love is enduring (3:22-24). Ironically, the same Torah that predicted and inflicted such horrific suffering also inspires fresh hope in the midst of the grief and pain.

A final consideration regarding the significance of the four acrostic poems is that they offer a fourfold testimony that suffering comes to an end. Grief does not go on indefinitely. As surely as the alphabet has a final letter, Judah eventually will find closure. Perhaps this is one reason why Lamentations presents the reader with four layers of acrostic poetry. By stacking one acrostic on top of another the book encourages a horizontal as well as a vertical reading.³ In other words, one could read the cross section of the *taw* stanzas for a reinforcement of the promise that Judah's period of humiliation and devastation is assured to end. Note how that such a cross-sectional reading betrays a progression in the successive *taw* stanzas.

³ Johan Renkema, "The Meaning of the Parallel Acrostics in Lamentations," VT 45, no. 3 (1995): 379–83.

TEXT	TRANSLATION	THEME
<p>תָּבֵא כָּל־רָעָתְךָ לְפָנָי וְעוֹלָל לָמוֹ בְּאִשֶּׁר עוֹלַלְתָּ לִּי עַל כָּל־פְּשָׁעַי בִּי־רַבּוֹת אֲנַחְתִּי וְלִבִּי דָּוָי: פ</p>	<p>1:22 May all of their evil come before you and deal as severely with them as you have with me because of all of my transgressions! For numerous are my groans and my heart is faint.</p>	<p>Bring my enemies to an end as you have brought me to an end.</p>
<p>תִּקְרָא כְּיוֹם מוֹעֵד מִגּוּרֵי מִסְבִּיב וְלֹא הָיָה בְּיוֹם אִי־יְהוָה פְּלִיט וְשָׂרִיד אֲשֶׁר־טַפַּחְתִּי וְרַבִּיתִי אֵיבֵי כָּלָם:</p>	<p>2:22 You summoned as at an appointed feast my fears from every side. And there was not on the day of YHWH's wrath a single survivor or refugee. Whomever I birthed and reared, my enemy finished them off!</p>	<p>YHWH brought my offspring to an end!</p>
<p>תָּשִׁיב לָהֶם גְּמוּל יְהוָה כְּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵיהֶם: תִּתֵּן לָהֶם מִגְנַת־לֵב תִּאֲלָתֶךָ לָהֶם: תִּרְדֹּף בְּאֵף וְתִשְׁמַדֵּם מִתַּחַת שָׁמַי יְהוָה: פ</p>	<p>3:64 May you repay to them a reward, O YHWH, befitting the work of their hands. 3:65 May you make them oblivious! Your curse be on them! 3:66 May you make them oblivious! Your curse be upon them! May you pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under YHWH's heaven!</p>	<p>Finish off my enemies!</p>
<p>תִּסְעֹנֵךְ בַּת־צִיּוֹן לֹא יוֹסִיף לְהַגְלוֹתְךָ פֶּקֶד עֹנֵךְ בַּת־אֲדוֹם גְּלָהּ עַל־חַטָּאתֶיךָ: פ</p>	<p>4:22 Finished is your punishment, Daughter Zion! No longer will he hold you captive! He has punished your iniquity, Daughter Edom. He has stripped you naked because of your sins!</p>	<p>Your captivity is over, your suffering is finished, and your enemies are finished.</p>

Themes & Motifs

The theology suggested by Lamentation's acrostic structure is expanded by a number of recurring themes. The first of these is the futility of Judah's alliances with foreign nations and the realization that she should have trusted in YHWH instead of human power. Chapter 1 underscores this with the refrain "There is no one to comfort her. All her lovers despise her." Judah was abandoned by all her "paramours" to whom she turned for help in her moment of need. By referring to Judah's allies as her "lovers" the poet invokes the adultery imagery so prevalent in the prophetic tradition. The sense of futility and disappointment is powerfully captured in the admission "We looked for a nation that could not save" (4:17).

A second motif is the description of YHWH as a Divine Warrior. Three texts in particular elaborate on the warfare YHWH waged against his own people. The first is 1:13-15.

"From on high he sent fire;
 into my bones he made it descend;
he spread a net for my feet;
 he turned me back;
he has left me stunned,
 faint all the day long.
"My transgressions were bound into a yoke;
 by his hand they were fastened together;
they were set upon my neck;
 he caused my strength to fail;
the Lord gave me into the hands
 of those whom I cannot withstand.
"The Lord rejected
 all my mighty men in my midst;
he summoned an assembly against me
 to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a winepress
 the virgin daughter of Judah.

Two bitter ironies emerge in the poet's recollection of Judah's calamity. First, the fire of YHWH's presence that had once been such a comfort to Judah during the nights of her desert sojourn turned ominous and lethal. Contrary to the symbolism of the burning bush that hosted a fire without being consumed, Judah became kindling for divine wrath. Second, the Lord who used to lead Israel's army into battle led the enemy army's charge against his own city. Such a picture confirms the words that the Commander of YHWH's armies (presumably YHWH himself) uttered in response to Joshua's question "Are you for us or for our enemies?" YHWH's answer was simply "No!" (Joshua 5:14). YHWH is not unconditionally for Israel/Judah and when the situation calls for it, he can enlist Judah's enemies to serve as his rod of anger (Lam. 3: Isa. 10:5).

The second text, Lam. 2:1-8, compares YHWH to a merciless foe who is unrelenting in pursuit of Judah's annihilation.

How the Lord in his anger
has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!
He has cast down from heaven to earth
the splendor of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
in the day of his anger.

The Lord has swallowed up without mercy
all the habitations of Jacob;
in his wrath he has broken down
the strongholds of the daughter of Judah;
he has brought down to the ground in dishonor
the kingdom and its rulers.

He has cut down in fierce anger
all the might of Israel;
he has withdrawn from them his right hand
in the face of the enemy;
he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob,
consuming all around.

He has bent his bow like an enemy,
with his right hand set like a foe;
and he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes
in the tent of the daughter of Zion;
he has poured out his fury like fire.

The Lord has become like an enemy;
he has swallowed up Israel;
he has swallowed up all its palaces;
he has laid in ruins its strongholds,
and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah
mourning and lamentation.

He has laid waste his booth like a garden,
laid in ruins his meeting place;
the LORD has made Zion forget
festival and Sabbath,
and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest.

The Lord has scorned his altar,
disowned his sanctuary;
he has delivered into the hand of the enemy
the walls of her palaces;
they raised a clamor in the house of the LORD
as on the day of festival.

The LORD determined to lay in ruins
the wall of the daughter of Zion;
he stretched out the measuring line;
he did not restrain his hand from destroying;
he caused rampart and wall to lament;
they languished together.

One cannot help but sense the irony of the cloud imagery that opens the second acrostic. Israel once enjoyed the guidance and protection of YHWH's glory cloud that descended from heaven into her camp and filled the tabernacle. After 586 BCE, Judah found herself under a very different cloud, the dark cloud of YHWH's war chariot running roughshod over Jerusalem (cf. Psalm 104:3; Isa. 19:1).

The disturbing description of divine wrath falls just short of identifying YHWH with Judah's enemies. YHWH has become LIKE an enemy. The choice of simile as opposed to metaphor is perhaps significant in that it implies difference as well as similarity. For all of YHWH's resemblance to a merciless enemy, something restrains the poet from complete identification. YHWH's discipline in the final analysis is not with a view to Judah's annihilation but with a view to her restoration. This important difference becomes the focus of 3:22-24.

It is the mercies of YHWH that we are not destroyed!⁴
That his affections never end.
They are new every morning,
Great is your faithfulness!
"YHWH is my lot," I say to myself.
Therefore, I keep trusting him.

This confession forms the basis for the book's closing supplication in 5:21-22, "Restore us to yourself, O YHWH, that we might be restored, unless you have rejected us forever and been excessively angry with us." Before the poet can entertain such hopeful thoughts, however, Judah's shock and dismay at YHWH's warfare must first be exhausted. The refrain that runs throughout chapter 2 is "YHWH did not spare" (2:2 twice; 2:17; 2:21). Judah's initial shock at the utter devastation left her with the impression that not even a remnant was spared contra the later reflection of 3:22.

The most emphatic complaint regarding the severity of YHWH's punishment comes in 3:1-18. Simile gives way to metaphor as the poet identifies YHWH as a lion and a bear mauling their prey (Lam. 3:10). The speaker of Lamentations 3 is convinced that YHWH has taken aim at him and intends to sink his arrows into him (3:12-13). Though YHWH is not here explicitly compared to an enemy warrior, the

⁴ The traditional rendering of the first part of this verse ("The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases.") unnecessarily amends the Hebrew text from *לֹא־תִמְנוּ כִּי לֹא־תִמְנוּ יְהוָה* to *לֹא־תִמְנוּ יְהוָה*. The MT, however, is perfectly intelligible as it stands and this is the reading offered here.

imagery clearly assumes the metaphor and even intensifies it with accusations of YHWH’s animal savagery against Judah. Ironically, these verses bear a marked affinity with Balaam’s third oracle (Num. 24:3-9) in which the prophet foresees certain doom for those nations that try to oppose Israel (Num 24:8-9). Note the similarities in the synoptic comparison below.

Num 24:3,6,8-9	Lam 3
<p>24:3 “The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of <u>the man</u> whose eye is opened,</p> <p>24:8 God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox; he shall eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall <u>break their bones</u> in pieces and pierce them through with <u>his arrows</u>.⁹ He crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up? Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.”</p>	<p>3:1 I am <u>the man</u> who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath;</p> <p>3:4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; <u>he has broken my bones</u>;</p> <p>¹⁰He is a bear lying in wait for me, a <u>lion</u> in hiding;</p> <p>¹¹ he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate;</p> <p>¹² he bent his bow and set me as a target for <u>his arrow</u>.</p> <p>¹³ He drove into my kidneys <u>the arrows</u> of his quiver;</p>

Balaam’s oracle of blessing on Israel is essentially reversed and turned into a curse in the mouth of the speaker in Lamentations 3. The god who fought for Israel in the wilderness sojourn now fights against her in a tragic turn provoked by Judah’s stubborn covenant infidelity.

The next significant theme to consider is how Judah’s exile is characterized as a recapitulation of the fall of Adam and Eve. The opening exclamation of the first two laments, אֵיכָה, evokes Gen 3:9 since it is a homonym for YHWH’s question posed to Adam “Where are you?” (אֵיכָה). The targumist was one of the first to make this connection, *Jeremiah the Prophet and High Priest said*, “How was it decreed that Jerusalem and her people should be punished with banishment and that they should be mourned with ’ekah. Just as when Adam and Eve were punished and expelled from the Garden of Eden and the Master of the Universe mourned them with ’ekah?”⁵

⁵ Robin Parry and Heath Thomas, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture* (Portland: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 228.

Lam 2:6 confirms this allusion to Eden stating, “He laid waste his booth like the garden.” The fact that the prepositional phrase “like the garden”(כַּגַּדֵּן) is pointed as having the definite article suggests that the Masoretes understood this as a reference to Eden. If this interpretation is correct, the text correlates Judah’s destruction and exile with the tradition of the Fall and banishment from Eden.

Another motif is Judah’s realization that her belief in the inviolability of Zion was mistaken. She appears to have suffered from a distorted Zion theology that precluded the possibility of YHWH’s abandoning his temple to be ransacked by Gentiles. In 4:12-16 even the nations are shocked that Zion has been penetrated. Here Lamentations deliberately reverses the language of Zion Psalms like Psalm 46 and 48. Especially relevant here is the reversal in Lamentation 4:11-12 of the nations’ reaction to Zion’s security in Psalm 48:4-6.

Psalm 48	Lam 4
<p>Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, ² beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. ³ Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress. ⁴ For behold, the kings assembled; they came on together. ⁵ As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight. ⁶ Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor. ⁷ By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish. ⁸ As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever. <i>Selah</i></p>	<p>The LORD gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations. ¹² The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem.</p>

Zion's vulnerability is underscored by the language Lamentations uses in reference to the temple. Never is the temple referred to as **הַיְכָל** (temple/palace). Rather, it is referred by such terms as **אֹהֶל** (tent, 2:4), **שֹׁב** (booth, 2:6), and **מִקְדָּשׁ** (sanctuary, 2:8, 20)⁶ which together suggest a temporary, mobile structure more akin to that used during the wilderness, conquest, and judges periods than Solomon's imposing edifice. Perhaps this is the poet's rhetorical way of undermining Judah's misplaced faith in the inherent indestructibility of the temple's structure.

Judah is thus forced to face the conditional nature of Zion's exaltation and security – it depends on the presence of God. 4:1-2 expands on this theme by noting that the gold of the temple was given to invaders to sue for peace but it did no good. The temple started out with numerous gold pieces and many doors and walls overlaid in gold (1 Kgs 6:20-22). Subsequent kings pilfered the temple to appease foreign invaders (2 Kgs 12:18; 14:14; 16:8; 18:14-16; 24:13; 2 Kgs 25:13-15). This diminution of the temple's grandeur reinforces the dispensability of the temple and the undermining of the belief in Zion's inviolability.

Lam. 2:1-14 connects the temple's destruction with two references to a lack of Torah and prophetic vision. This disregard for the divine word seems to be the key to Judah's unraveling (2:9, 14). By dismantling Torah and disregarding true prophecy in their sin, they removed the "walls" of order and restraint and thus left themselves exposed to destruction (cf. Prov 29:18 and the connection in Ezra-Nehemiah between rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and reestablishing the Torah of YHWH).

Insult is added to injury as the nations who once admired Judah's beauty now taunt her because of her demise (2:15). Strong allusions to Ezek 16:14; 27:3; 28:12 and Psalm 48:3 emerge as the nations recall in unbelief that Jerusalem was once praised as the perfection of beauty and the joy of the earth. This may point to YHWH's "stripping" Jerusalem of everything he gave her (Ezek 16). 2:9-17 closes the section with the recognition that Jerusalem's destruction is according to YHWH's plan even if its brutality is shocking. The shock of the brutality of judgment is recognized by both Judah and the neighboring nations. At times the poet implies that YHWH went too far (2:1-8; 5:1-7, 20-22), at others he recognizes the brutality of Judah's judgment as the just recompense for her sins (1:8, 18; 3:34-42; 5:16).

⁶ This phrase is common in Exodus – Judges, absent in Samuel and Kings, rare in Isaiah (5x) and Jeremiah (1x), quite frequent in Ezekiel (22x!), nearly absent in the 12 minor prophets (1x in Amos 7:13), rare in Psalms (4x), and in Daniel (3x), rare in Ezra-Nehemiah (3x), and rare in Chronicles (6x). The absence of the term in Samuel-Kings is telling in that this narrative relates Israel's transition into a legitimate monarchy complete with all of its symbols of security, including a temple representative of the deity's sponsorship of the dynasty. The resurgence of the term in Ezekiel is also telling in that this is the prophet who sees the vision of YHWH's departure from his temple which leaves it vulnerable to attack.

If a synthesis between these poles occurs in Lamentations, it is surely in the imprecations that attribute excessive brutality to the human agents of YHWH's wrath, rather than to YHWH himself, and that pray for YHWH's vengeance upon them (1:21-22; 3:58-66; 4:21-22).

The foregoing survey identified four themes deemed particularly significant for synthesizing the theology of Lamentations. The first is the futility of Judah's alliances with foreign nations which compromised her allegiance to YHWH and ultimately offered her no comfort in her moment of need. The second is YHWH's warfare against his own people which seriously challenged Judah's understanding of her election and YHWH's sponsorship of the temple and the Davidic dynasty (4:20). The third is the way the laments cast Judah's exile as a recapitulation of the Fall narrative in Genesis 3 suggesting a theology of history that is neither cyclical, as assumed by the nature mythology of her neighbors, nor simplistically linear. Rather, Lamentations sees history progressing as a spiral in which there is both progression and repetition. The final theme is the correction of Judah's distorted Zion theology which exposes a hermeneutical failure on Judah's part to grasp the conditional element of the Davidic covenant and of YHWH's promises to protect Zion. With these themes in place, we can proceed to a consideration of the significance of Lamentations 3 as a kind of center to the book and as the final piece in a synthesis of the book's theology.

Lamentations 3 As a Theological Center for the Book

Two aspects of the literary character of Lamentations 3 draw the reader's attention to it as the book's center of gravity. The first is the heightening of the acrostic structure in which each line of each strophe begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The difference between Lamentations 3's acrostic and the two preceding it and the one following is illustrated below.

Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4
A_____	A_____	A_____	A_____
_____	_____	A_____	_____
_____	_____	A_____	B_____
B_____	B_____	B_____	_____
_____	_____	B_____	
_____	_____	B_____	

The effect of tripling the acrostic trope in the third chapter is to suggest an intensification of the community's lament as it nears a breakthrough to a new and profound hope that somehow has survived the devastation. This hope finds expression at the decisive turn in the third lament that occurs at 3:21 "But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope." Following this disjunction from the preceding complaint the poetry soars with an expression of hope unlike anything else in the book.

From 3:22-33 the reader is treated to a fresh perspective on the community's suffering anchored in Israel's traditions regarding YHWH's character. It culminates in this remarkable assertion regarding the divine heart that lies at the root of this devastating judgment: "For the Lord will not reject (us) forever; though he has inflicted pain, he will pity (us) as befits his (history of) merciful acts. For he does not willingly afflict when he inflicts pain on human beings." This assertion of hope comes near the center of the book and serves as a suitable point of reference to all that precedes and all that follows – a kind of Janus text that balances the foregoing expressions of grief and anticipates the final appeal of 5:21.

The second feature of the third lament that distinguishes it from the others is the unexpected masculine voice that launches the poem with a self-reflective assessment of the damage he has suffered at YHWH's hand. This masculine "I" is surprising after two laments dominated by the feminine imagery of "Daughter Zion" who in a similar manner reflects on the personal damage she has suffered in the destruction of Jerusalem. A pleasing balance and symmetry is struck by this shift in gender, but even more significant is the possible identity of this "man who has seen oppression."

The opening of Lamentations 3 is strikingly reminiscent of royal presentation formulae from ANE inscriptions leaving one to wonder if this is the Davidic king's voice emerging from the din of the destruction and the lament of the general population.⁷ A number of reasons suggest this is likely the case. For example, 3:1 mentions the "rod of his wrath" which could easily be an allusion to 2 Sam 7:14 "the rod of men" or better "with men as my rod." Furthermore, 3:10 compares YHWH to a vicious lion and bear. These correspond to the two animals David slew by God's power (1 Sam 17:34-37). This could serve as an ironic reversal of divine favor that once delivered bears and lions into the king's hand. The statement "the LORD is my portion" (3:24) could easily be understood as an allusion to the Davidic prayers, Psalms 16:5 & 142:5.

It is also interesting to note that the emphasis on YHWH's shutting out prayer calls into question Solomon's request that God always hear the prayer directed toward the temple (1 Kgs 8:28-30).

⁷ Kim Lan Nguyen, *Chorus in the Dark: The Voices on the Book of Lamentations* (Sheffield: Sheffield-Phoenix Press, 2013), 138-139. Cf. also such self-presentations in Eccl 1:12; 2 Sam 19:23; 1 Kgs 1:5.

This raises the question as to the real connection between Zion and the Davidic Dynasty. Perhaps it is not as Judah had thought. YHWH is no sponsor of any human dynasty. The entire lamed stanza deals with injustices that ultimately would be laid at the King's feet (3:34-36). These could serve as acknowledgement that the dynasty's failure to establish justice corrupted the entire temple establishment and jeopardized Judah's relationship to YHWH. Solomon's prayer in 1 Kgs 8 contains the refrain "then hear in heaven" which may find an ironic echo in 3:50. In any case, whatever misunderstanding Judah had regarding the security of Zion on the basis of the Davidic covenant is addressed and corrected by a Davidic voice.

This understanding of the identity of the voice in Lamentations 3 finds support by the fact that this lament is flanked by express mention of the Messiah and the question of his destiny (2:2,6,9; 4:20). This identification of the speaker with a type of the Davidic kings underscores the suitability of Lamentations 3 as a theological center for the book. The messiah on behalf of the people voices their complaint (3:1-18, 43-54), accepts responsibility, expresses hope (3:19-39,55-66), and leads the people in returning to God (3:40-42). He does so however, without diluting the complaint with the hope. He holds them in tension and waits for God to bring resolution (3:25-27). No divine voice ever comes, however, at least not within the confines of Lamentations. The closest we come is the promise by proxy in 4:22. The book ends with an unanswered request in order to put us in the position of waiting on the LORD for our salvation.

Conclusion

By considering the books acrostic structure, its prominent themes, and the function of Lamentations 3 as a kind of center for the book, one gains a sense of a coherent theological thrust. The book encourages the suffering community to affirm order in the midst of chaos (acrostic structure), while taking responsibility for their own role in the devastation of Daughter Zion. Meanwhile they can recall YHWH's faithful merciful acts of the past as a basis for waiting on YHWH in hope that he can restore them from even such utter devastation as was brought by the events of 586 BCE. Judah's testimony encourages contemporary believers to give full vent to their disillusionment and despair while remembering what a resilient hope belongs to those who trust in YHWH. No situation is so far gone that YHWH cannot intervene to bring redemption and restoration. It is on the basis of that testimony that we with Judah can cry out "Restore us, YHWH, that we might be restored!" (Lam 5:21).