I. INTRODUCTION

A. Literary Analysis

1. Consists of 5 closely structured poetic compositions on the topic of the destruction of Jerusalem.

   a. The poems evoke scenes of catastrophe and articulate the psychic and religious trauma of the survivors.

   b. These poems are similar to those in Psalms, Job, Isaiah (40-55), Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

2. The first 4 laments are marked by an acrostic use of the alphabet in which the entire Hebrew alphabet of 22 letters are distributed in sequence throughout these 4 poems.

3. Chapter 5, the alphabet is wanting, but the poem contains 22 lines, equaling the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

4. This acrostic structure also breaks the flow of chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 into 22 subunits.

   a. These laments present discrete laments giving brief descriptions through terse speech.

   b. Such compact language reinforces strongly expressed emotions while guarding against bombast and sentimentality.

5. Further the 1st 4 poems reflect a disproportionate length between the two parts forming a verse, with the 2nd being shorter than the 1st.

   a. This produces a falling rhythm that seems to "limp," "choke," or "sob" in sympathy with the contents of the poem.

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b. Chapter 5, in contrast, maintains an ever length between the two sentence elements.

c. This seems to bring the poem to an emotional, peaceful conclusion even if the words do not.


a. The city is personified as a widow and mother whose husband is not dead; only remote and hostile.

b. Neither are her children dead since some have survived and ponder what has happened.

c. Jeremiah encourages the "widow/mother" Zion to cry out to Yahweh for deliverance, 2:13-18

d. He also announces punishment on Edom and the end of exile for Judah, 4:21-22).

7. Like an individual's lament, personified Jerusalem speaks

a. As a suffering woman, 1:12-16, 18-22; 2:20-22.

b. "Mother Zion" describes the pain and anger of her Judahite "children"

c. She confesses their sins and calls on God to mitigate or terminate the suffering.

d. The reader is acutely aware that this woman is an imaginative figure who both embodies and stands off from particular Judahites

e. This personification successfully portrays the mass suffering by the individual Judahite.

8. Chapter 3's individual laments abandon the personifications of 1-4 and shifts to the personal "I," which are typical of anonymous sufferers so plentiful in the Psalms. The anonymity here may be purposeful.
9. Chapter 5 is a communal lament — Judah speaks in a united voice that erases many earlier ambiguities and brings dramatic closure to the troubled book.

B. **Composition**

1. Lamentations was written in the 6th century B.C. to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem by the Neo-Babylonian in 587.
   
   a. The typical lament language of the day was used.
   
   b. There is a long history of this genre of lament over a destroyed city going back to early times in ancient Mesopotamia.
   
   c. Cf. "The Lament for the Destruction of Ur"

   (1) Composed after the fall of Ur to the Elamites at the end of the city's 3rd dynasty (c. 2000 BC).
   
   (2) Contains one (possibly the 1st) of 5 known Mesopotamian "city laments—dirges for ruined cities in the voice of the city's tutelary goddess—within its eleven kirugu (sections or stanzas).
   
   (3) In this case it is Ningal who weeps for her city, after pleading with the god Enlil to call back his destructive storm.
   
   (4) Interspersed with the goddess's wailing are other sections, possibly of different origin and composition; these describe the ghost town that Ur has become, recount the wrath of Enlil's storm, and invoke the protection of the god Nanna against future calamities.

2. The 1st 4 laments share vocabulary and stylistic devices, modulation of speaking voice formal features, and the acrostic scheme

   a. These similarities imply a single author—Jeremiah

   b. On the other hand each lament is self-contained, displaying marked individuality.
3. The separate laments were created for recitation at annual fast days observed at the site of the ruined Temple during the Exile, (Zech. 7:1-7; 8:19)

a. **Zechariah 7:1** \(\text{NRS}\
\text{In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev. 2 Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men, to entreat the favor of the Lord, 3 and to ask the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts and the prophets, "Should I mourn and practice abstinence in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" 4 Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: 5 Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? 6 And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink only for yourselves? 7 Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, along with the towns around it, and when the Negeb and the Shephelah were inhabited?}

b. **Zechariah 8:19** \(\text{NRS}\
**Thus says the Lord of hosts:** The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah: therefore love truth and peace.

c. Apparently some form of ritual practice continued at the Temple site throughout the Exile, Jer. 41:5

(1) **Jeremiah 41:5** \(\text{NRS}\
\text{eighty men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria, with their beards shaved and their clothes torn, and their bodies gashed, bringing grain offerings and incense to present at the temple of the Lord.}

(2) Other communal lament, suitable for these commemorative fasts an Psalms 44, 60, 74, 79, 83, 123, 137

(3) Compared to these Lamentations displays high level of artistic complexity, subtlety, and cohesion,
4. The aim of the acrostic seems to be to foster a comprehensive catharsis of grief and confession linked to as inculcation of faith and hope
   a. It accomplished this by covering the subject “from to Z.”
   b. This impulse to explore the trauma until the topic is "exhausted" is served well by the acrostic structure.

5. While the writing of Lamentations was occasioned by the Temple's destruction, the preservation of the book probably had to do with their use on the occasion of the cleansing/building of the temple
   a. This was the Mesopotamian practice
   b. It suggests the somberness and restrained hope of the exilic compositions might have been retained as a deliberate reminder of dark days
   c. In other words, "We remember such events, so we do not forget how they came about, and thus how we should avoid similar behavior," e.g., Lenin's statues—"Leave them up so we do not forget!"

6. Lamentations as we have them offer the following:
   a. A very strong statement of faith and hope
   b. This is highlighted by the triple acrostic and repetitions of the same acrostic word
   c. Note the threefold "good" in 3:25-27

(1)  \textit{NRS Lamentations 3:25} \textit{The LORD is good} to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.  26 \textit{It is good} that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.  27 \textit{It is good} for one to bear the yoke in youth

(2) This is the center of the book.

C. \textit{Function as Scripture}

2. "Satisfaction" of Judah’s sin and guilt through prolonged exile is shared by Lam, 4:22 and Isa. 40:2.

3. Familiarity with Lamentations is also evident in Isaiah 56-66, 2 Chronicles, Sirach, and Baruch, the latter modeled in part on Lamentations itself.

4. Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
   a. The reading of Lamentations on the 9th of the month of Ab became part of the festal calendar of postbiblical Judaism
   b. Lamentations Rabbah, a Jewish midrash (i.e., a commentary) redacted at the end of the 5th century AD., interprets the biblical text verse by verse and contains a large collection of sayings, stories, and homilies.

5. The tradition of Jeremian authorship for the book is provided by 2 Chron 35:25
   a. NRS 2 Chronicles 35:25 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.
   b. This also contributes to the view of Jeremiah as the weeping or sorrowful prophet.

6. Christian liturgies have included Lamentations in readings for Holy Week, thereby referring its descriptions to the sufferings of Christ.
   a. Over the centuries, Lamentations often has been set to music, from Gregorian chant through the work of major composers beginning with the Renaissance
   b. Its subject has frequently been applied to later national calamities (e.g., in Polish history and the Jewish Holocaust) and to the fall of other great cities (e.g., Constantinople).
7. In the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations is counted as one of the 5 Megilloth, or “Scrolls,” read at major festivals
   a. The others are Song of Solomon, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Esther
   b. English versions, following the Septuagint and the Vulgate, place Lamentations after Jeremiah.

8. In its original setting, Lamentations performed a basic task of historical "grief work."
   a. It bridged the gap between primal grief and outrage at the fall of Jerusalem and the ethics and theology
   b. Lamentations' attempt to deal with the grief, anger, etc., of the destruction of Jerusalem offers a paradigm for Christians who struggle with theodicy in their lives.

D. Authorship and Setting

1. Jewish tradition is unanimous in assigning the book to Jeremiah
   a. The hymns themselves are found anonymously in the Hebrew text
   b. The Septuagint contains the additional statement, "And it came to pass, after Israel had been taken away captive and Jerusalem had been laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and uttered this lamentation over Jerusalem and said."
   c. The Targum also states that Jeremiah was the author.
   d. Zechariah 12:11 and 2 Chronicles 35:25 may refer to Lamentations

(1) NRS Zechariah 12:11 On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Haddar-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo.

(2) NRS 2 Chronicles 35:25 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. Jeremiah was by nature adapted to the composition of such elegies, as is proved by his book of prophecies.

3. Only in modern times has the authorship of these hymns by Jeremiah been seriously called into question;

4. The book is closely connected with the person of Jeremiah.
   a. If he himself is the author, he must have composed it in his old age, when he had time and opportunity to live over again all the sufferings of his people and of himself
   b. It is also possible that his disciples put this book in the present shape of uniform sentential utterances, basing this on the manner of lamentations common to Jeremiah..

E. Wisdom affinities with Lamentations show prominently in 3:25-39
   1. Suffering is seen as disciplinary as well as retribution
   2. The long-range justice of God is affirmed
   3. Patient waiting on and hope in God is instilled

F. Royal traditions are most evident in the cries of those who thought Jerusalem was impregnable, 2:15-16
   1. Similarly, those who trusted totally in their king as "the anointed of Yahweh," 4:20
   2. The text expresses shocked disbelief at the enemy's violation of the Temple, 1:10; 2:6-7, 20.
   3. These things suggest that all the special privileges of David and Zion, which depended on the faithfulness of Judah, have now been justly canceled.
4. The censure of the priests and prophets presupposes the censure of the political leaders.

5. Further the phrase "our fathers sinned and are not" (5:7; cf, 2:9) may refer to the political leadership swept away by death and exile.

6. The focus on faulty religious leadership seems to indicate that the political leadership is no longer in power.

G. The ritual setting for Lamentations was the ruined Temple site at which place fasting, prayer, and sacrifice were carried on with the apparent permission of the Babylonian overlords.

H. Lamentations, in its final form, exhibits a striking and innovative amalgam of prophetic, Deuteronomistic, and wisdom materials.

II. COMMENTARY

A. 1:1-22, First Lament of Poet and Zion

1. Verses 1-11 = lament of Jeremiah
2. Verses 12-22 = lament of the personified city
3. The emphasis is that the city is bereft of comfort from any source
4. Her plight is described in lurid fashion:
   a. Subjection to conquerors and betrayal by former allies
   b. Contempt and gloating by her enemies
   c. Decimation of her populace by death and exile
   d. Profanation of the Temple by the enemy
   e. Cessation of festivals
   f. Shortage of food.
5. Zion ironically laments the incomparability of her pain
   a. Verse 15: God's murder of his people is called "a festival" and a "grape treading harvest"—"he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men; the Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of Judah" RSV
b. **Verse 22:** Zion confesses her rebellion wants God to provide punishment for her destroyers—"Let all their evil doing come before you; and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many and my heart is faint" (NRS)

c. Uniquely, Zion identifies a past event with the "Day of Yahweh" as the time of his judgment (v. 12) and Zion that this day be extended to fall upon the arrogant enemy.

B. **2:1—22, Second Lament of Poet and Zion**

1. In comparison to chapter 1 in this chapter Zion says much less
   
a. Instead the language is more articulate and reflective
   b. Jeremiah addresses Zion directly as she struggles to understand.
   
c. The "Day of Yhwh" is described as a demonic festival at the Temple site
   
d. This place of praise has been transformed as a place of God’s terrible destruction of his own religious center, vv. 4-7, 22

2. Jeremiah is in close emotional and ideological sympathy with Zion

   a. He agrees with Zion's speech of chapter 1 and depicts Yahweh as the direct destroyer of the city’s fortifications, palaces, and Temple
   
   b. **Verses 11-12:** He is overcome by the sight of famished infants dying in their mothers’ laps
   
   c. He agrees with Zion's self-description that her state is undescribable and without comfort

   (1) **1:12:** Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger

   (2) **2:13:** What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may
comfort you, O virgin daughter Zion? For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can heal you?

d. **Verse 14:** He deplores the fact that Zion was misled by prophets who gave "slick" oracles of cheap optimism that were out of touch with reality—"Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen oracles for you that are false and misleading"

e. **Verses 17-19:** The LORD has done what he purposed, he has carried out his threat; as he ordained long ago, he has demolished without pity; he has made the enemy rejoice over you, and exalted the might of your foes. 18 Cry aloud to the Lord! O wall of daughter Zion! Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite! 19 Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street.

(1) Yahweh’s decree of judgment remains defensible

(2) Nevertheless, the punishment is bitter and hard to accept.

3. **Verses 20-22:** Zion again takes up the lament and agrees with Jeremiah.

a. Unlike in chapter 1 she does not mention her sins or her desire for the enemy's punishment.

b. Instead she questions the unnatural things this punishment has produced

(1) Women cannibalizing their own children

(2) Priests and prophets cut down in the sacred Temple precincts.

c. Basically she asks for God to see what he has done.

C. **3:1-66, An Individual Laments.**
1. This lament asks, "How are we to understand and live with a merited punishment that has produced such shocking and excessive results, one that creates new injustices?"

2. **Verse 1**, "I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath," breaks sharply with the previous personification of Zion.
   
   a. Yet it has much in common with the previous statements

3. Just who this speaker is gives the reader pause.
   
   a. His anonymity deepens reader involvement in the engagement with suffering
   
   b. The reader is able to see suffering through both national and individual

4. **Verses 40-47**: In the midst of these speeches by individual(s) comes a communal lament
   
   a. At first it seems out of place
   
   b. It lacks both the confident insight and faith that precedes it
   
   c. It has a level of religious traditionalism—"Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven"—but is still struggling with the faith issues at hand.

D. **4:1-22, Third Lament of Poet and City**

1. Describes the hardship and disgrace among the survivors in Jerusalem,
   
   a. Like chapters 1 & 2, this chapter is divided between 2 speakers
   
   b. Zion has hardly anything to say.

2. **Verses 11-20**: Instead of Zion personified, the city expresses itself in a communal lament
   
   a. The lament exposes the physical, sociopolitical, and moral fragility of the upper classes
(1) Political and religious leaders failed equally, v. 12

(2) Treacherous prophets and priests are rejected as though they are lepers, vv. 13-16

3. The people acknowledge their misplaced trust in these officials, vv. 11-19

4. Verse 22: A prophetic announcement that the punishment will not be forever, v. 22

5. Thus the section ends in hope.


1. This 2nd communal lament portrays the economic hardship, social disorder, and political restrictions among the inhabitants

2. This lament reaffirms the paradox explored in chapters 3 and 4.
   a. Judah has both sinned and been sinned against
   b. The tension between deserved and undeserved suffering is resolved

3. The people are now enabled to own up to their sins, vv. 7, 16
   a. Yet they appeal for their disgrace and oppression to be relieved, vv. 1, 17-20
   b. This new maturity enables the people to appeal for a restored relationship with God, v. 21

4. Verse 22: Yet there is still a measure of insecurity—"Or have you utterly rejected us? Are you exceedingly angry with us?"
   a. Has Judah learned her lesson too late?
   b. Does God still honor a covenant with Israel or has he broken off his relationship with them irrevocably?
   c. The unclouded confidence of 3:25-39, 52-66 is not yet firmly within the people’s collective grasp.
d. Even so, the overarching sense of the book is that the enduring trust situated at the center of the collection in chap. 3 will in time prevail among those who mourn Jerusalem by praying to Yahweh.