

VERY IMPORTANT CORRECTION: the audio lecture for this handout contains a blunder which I did not discover until I presented chapter 5 of Lamentations. At about the 55 minute mark, I state that chapter 3 of Lamentations has 198 lines of Hebrew. That statement was a major goof because chapter 3 in Hebrew has 66 lines of Hebrew or 3 lines of Hebrew per letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Please disregard all my statements about 198 lines in chapter 3 and correct your understanding of the original text accordingly. I am very sorry for the error and apologize for any confusion.

Lamentations—Handout #1

Narrative Paradigm:

Titles

אֵיכָה (’*ékah*) (MT) ; קִינּוֹת (*qînoth*) ; ΘΡΗΝΟΙ (*Thrēnoi*) (LXX) ; *Lamentationes* (Vulgate)

Threnody =

Thomas Tallis; Igor Stravinsky, *Threni*

Plangency; plangent (Latin, *plango*) =

Dolorous (Latin, *dolorosus*) =

קִינּוֹת (2 Chron 35:25)—for whom?

?Problem:

Position in the Canon

1. In the LXX, called “Threnoi/ _____ of Jeremiah” and follows book of Jeremiah. Contains this superscription: “after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem made desolate, Jeremiah sat weeping . . . this lamentation over Jerusalem.”
2. Jerome’s Vulgate followed the LXX and thus influenced modern versions.
3. Tanach places it among the five Megilloth (“minor scrolls”), i.e., Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther (order varies in Jewish sources).
4. In the MT, the Megilloth are placed among the Kethubim (“Writings”), i.e., Psalms, Job, Proverbs, etc. Here they have the following order (Kittel’s, *Biblia Hebraica*; or *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*): Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther. NB: the chronological order of this listing—Ruth (ancestor of Solomon); Song of Solomon (young Solomon); Ecclesiastes (old Solomon); Lamentations (end of Solomon’s Temple); Esther (Jewish Diaspora without king or temple).

Liturgical Use of the Megilloth in the Jewish Synagogue

Song of Solomon is read during Passover; Ruth is read during the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost; Lamentations is read on the 9th of Ab (July-August) in commemoration of the destruction of the (second) Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus in 70 A.D. (2 Kings 25:8-9 indicates the Babylonians appeared for the destruction of the [first/Solomonic] Temple on the 7th of Ab and Jeremiah 52:12 indicates they appeared on the 10th of Ab. Thus, the 9th of Ab covers both B. C. and A. D. traditions. Oded Lipschits places the exact date of the destruction of the Solomonic Temple at the end of July 586 B.C., *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 74). Next in the liturgical use comes Ecclesiastes read during the Feast of Tabernacles. Finally is Esther read during the Feast of Purim.

Authorship

On account of the shared vocabulary and motifs (not to mention poetic mastery) between the book of the prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations, there is no need to doubt the traditional assignment of Lamentations to the gifted poetic prophet—a tradition which extends back to the LXX (3rd to 1st century B.C.), Josephus (1st century A.D.), the Babylonian Talmud (200-500 A.D.) and the Jewish Targums (early 1st century A.D. and later). However, virtually no modern OT scholars, liberal-critical or evangelical-conservative, believe any longer in the Jeremianic authorship of the book. My opinion is that Jeremiah is the author based on poetic genre, recursive vocabulary (some of which is unique to the prophecy of Jeremiah and Lamentations), tone, imagery, narrative thread and biblical-theology. No other book of the OT matches the timbre of Jeremiah as does Lamentations; nor does any other book of the OT complete or provide the epilogue to the prophecy of Jeremiah as Lamentations does.

Poetic Features

The form of the book of Lamentations is unique—there is nothing else like it in the OT. Four of the five chapters are magnificent acrostics. An acrostic is the use of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order for the initial word of each verse through the 22 letters of that alphabet from aleph (א) to tav (ת) (i.e., like A to Z). Chapters 1 (22 verses) and 2 (22 verses) contain the full alphabet in three-line colas/phrases (66 lines of Hebrew). Chapter 3 contains the acrostic with three lines per verse, each initial word per line beginning with the same Hebrew letter (66 verses with 3 lines per verse = 198 lines of Hebrew). Chapter 4 returns to the 22 verse pattern, but contains only two lines per verse (44 lines of Hebrew). Chapter 5 changes the paradigm—it contains no acrostic though it contains 22 verses of one line per verse (22 lines of Hebrew).

Notice the symmetry which results from this structural pattern. Chapters 1 and 2 have 66 lines each; chapters 4 and 5 have 66 lines together; chapter 3 has 198 lines. The total of the lines in chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 is 198; the same as the total lines in chapter 3 (198). In other words, the

largest and central chapter is line-symmetrical to the four other smaller chapters. Also, the acrostic feature builds to the magnificent 3rd chapter only to diminish from that ‘pinnacle’ to a non-acrostic poem (chapter 5). The structure of the 5-chapter poem flows to its peak, then ebbs to something unique—a non-acrostic final poem. So too the flow of the life of the city and the poet—they ebb to the unusual end chapter with its open and plaintive question about the future. But it does so by completing the line-symmetry of the poem as a whole, i.e., underscoring the integrity and unity of the entire book.

The acrostic element is an indication of genius, mastery of style and rhetoric. It may also reflect theological insight as the poem unfolds in its entirety.

Commentary

The most useful modern evangelical commentary is by Paul House in the Word Commentary series (bound with Song of Solomon by Duane Garrett). For a brief lay-oriented commentary, cf. R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (1973), in the old Tyndale OT Commentary series; the new revised and up-dated Tyndale volume on Lamentations (2013) is virtually useless. The major critical commentary is by Johan Renkema.

Biblical-theological Overview

The narrative poetic art of this book unfolds in two voices: the voice of the poet (Jeremiah) and the voice of the city (Jerusalem). The poet narrates the story he observes, experiences, mirrors. The city narrates the story she observes, experiences, echoes. Both narratives unite in the story God reveals—his story, the ultimate, eschatological narrative. Thus, the eschatological poet or eschatological Jeremiah previews himself in the historic Jeremiah poet. And the eschatological city or eschatological New Jerusalem previews itself in the historic Jerusalem city. The horizon of the Christian reader of the poetic narrative extends to the unending future of an eternal poet in an eternal city where lamentation is no more part of the narrative. Lamentations brings us to a far better narrative—the story of a poet-prophet who is the Son of God and his dwelling place, an indestructible city of joy forevermore.