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Structure and Meaning in Lamentations

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Lamentations is perhaps the best example in the Bible of a combination of divine inspiration and human artistic ability. The depth of pathos as the writer probed the suffering of Zion and his own suffering is unprecedented. Each chapter is an entity in itself, a complete poem.[1] The most obvious literary device utilized by the poet is the acrostic; that is, poems are built around the letters of the alphabet. As is well known, chapters 1 and 2 have three lines in each of their 22 verses, and the first line of each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.[2] Chapter 3 also has 66 lines, with the first three lines each beginning with the first letter of the alphabet, the second three lines beginning with the second letter of the alphabet and so forth. Chapter 4 has two lines per verse, with only the first line of each verse beginning with the successive letter of the alphabet. Chapter 5 is unique in that it has 22 lines (the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet), but the alphabetic structure is not used. Gottwald describes the tenor of this structure.

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[1] This article follows Watson's terminology. A "poem" is an alphabetic unit; a "stanza" is a subsection of the poem; a "strophe" is one or more cola; a "colon" is a single line of poetry (W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 26 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1984], 7, 12-15; see also 190-200).

[2] A fourth line appears in 1:7 and in 2:19. While some excise the lines, Renkema defends their integrity (S. J. Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations," in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, ed. W. van der Meer and J. C. de Moor, JSOT Supplement 74 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1988], 316). Freedman is cautious and shows the possibility of their validity (David Noel Freedman, *Poetry, Pottery and Prophecy* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980], 64-65).

It is the belief of the present writer that the author of the Book of Lamentations selected the external principle of the acrostic to correspond to the internal spirit and intention of the work. He wished to play upon the collective grief of the community in its every aspect, "from Aleph to Taw," so that the people might experience an emotional catharsis. He wanted to bring about a complete cleansing of the conscience through a total confession of sin. Even then his purpose was not spent. He was also determined to inculcate an attitude of submission and a prospect of hope. By intimately binding together the themes of sin, suffering, submission and hope, he intended to implant the conviction of trust and confidence in the goodness and imminent intervention of Yahweh. That this is the case is evident in the third poem where the acrostic form is intensified at precisely the point where hope becomes the strongest.[3]

The purpose of this article is to take another look at the structure of the Book of Lamentations in relation to the book's content and message and to discuss the possibility of a "mini-acrostic" in 5:19-20.

Scholars from all persuasions agree that the writer of Lamentations was a contemporary with the events of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. described in the book.[4] Most agree that the writer wrote of himself in chapter 3 (though even there he spoke as a representative of the people). Hillers represents many commentators when he suggests that five poems by that many authors were brought together as an acrostic.[5] However, Renkema, in the most detailed structural analysis to date, argues for a concentric design so intricate that the entire work must be attributed to one person.[6] Over the years scholars have debated the authorship of Lamentations. Though the biblical text does not ascribe the work to anyone, early tradition, including the Septuagint translation, assigned Lamentations to Jeremiah. The date of the events, the similarity of the suffering of the man in chapter 3 to that of Jeremiah, and the fact that Jeremiah wrote laments about Josiah (2 Chron. 35:25) lend credence to the tradition, though the question should be left open.

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[3]   Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, Studies in Biblical Theology 14 (London: SCM, 1954), 30.

[4]   More recently Iain Provan displays an excessive skepticism as to what can be known about the historical setting of the book (*Lamentations*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 11-12).

[5]   Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 370. Gordis writes, "The book consists of five elegies, three of which (chaps. 1, 2, 4) are laments on the burning of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, as well as on the national devastation that followed the calamities of 587 B.C.E." (Robert Gordis, "A Commentary on the Text of Lamentations," *Jewish Quarterly Review* [1967]: 267).

[6]   Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations," 390-91. Working from a different point of view, Marcus agrees (David Marcus, "Non-Recurring Doublets in the Book of Lamentations," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 [1986]: 177-94).

While some of the recent analyses of Lamentations may be over-drawn,[7] it is important to note that the level of sophistication for an Old Testament poet, whether Jeremiah or some other, was high.

> There can be no question about the literary excellence of these five po-ems. Among the collective laments of the ancient Near East they are without peer. Under the discipline of acrostic form and the chaste economy of the Qinah metre, the poet has created in clearly defined strophes a sincere and powerful vehicle of expression. His wealth of imagery is ceaseless; his turn of phrase generally felicitous.[8]

The Split Alphabet

Each of chapters 1–4 of Lamentations seems to include a pattern of splitting the alphabet: א (*aleph*) to כ (*kaph*) in the first half of the chapter and ל (*lamed*) to ת (*taw*) in the second half. This pat-tern is quite clear in chapter 1.[9] The first unit (*aleph* to *kaph*) dis-cusses the pitiable state of Jerusalem, which is personified through-out. The form is third person except in two places where Zion breaks out in a cry to Yahweh: "See, O Lord, my affliction, for the enemy has magnified himself" (1:9) and "See, O Lord, and look, for I am de-spised" (v. 11).

The utter desolation of the city and the temple (v. 10) are set forth in graphic terms. All segments of society—princes, priests, and people—have been affected. Jerusalem suffered because of her many sins (vv. 5, 8), and there is no effort to claim unjust punishment, as some of the exiles claimed (Ezek. 18:2).[10] Even so, Zion raised her

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[7] See, for example, Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations," 333 As Renkema acknowledges, much of his work on chapters 1 and 2 was done by A Condamin ("Symmetrical Repetitions in *Lamentations* Chapters I and II," *Journal of Theological Studies* 7 [1906] 137-40), though Renkema cites him from his *Poèmes de la Bible*

[8] Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, 111 Dahood remarks that "the textual discoveries at Ras Shamra-Ugarit in 1929 on revealed a highly refined and elliptical poetry around 1350 B C , the poetic matrix from which biblical poetry took its origins Now the recovery of the Ebla tablets of circa 2500 B C carries the Canaanite literary tradition back into the third millennium With this long literary tradition at their disposition, biblical poets surely possessed a formation and techni-cal capacity that modern critics underestimate at their own peril" (Mitchell Dahood, "New Readings in Lamentations," *Biblica* 59 [1978] 197) Marcus argues for 183 dou-blets that he believes lend credence to the idea of one author and to the sophistication of the poet ("Non-Recurring Doublets in the Book of Lamentations")

[9] For a similar discussion on chapter 1 and the structure of the book, see Bo Johnson, "Form and Message in Lamentations," *Zeitschrift fur Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97 (1985) 58-73

[10] The phrase, "Our fathers sinned, and are no more It is we who have borne their iniquities" (5 7), goes against this statement However, according to Hillers, "fathers" could refer to the sins of the prophets and priests and to the sinful policy of foreign alliances (Delbert Hillers, "History and Poetry in Lamentations," *Currents in Theology and Missions* 10 [1983] 161) Renkema argues for a similar interpretation ("The Literary Structure of Lamentations," 357, n) Brunet agrees, but from a different

voice to her God and cried out for mercy.[11] Surely Yahweh could at least look on her in her hour of deep distress. This demand (introduced with "See" [רְאֵה] at both Lamentations 1:9 and 1:11) is a device that anticipates the second unit (vv. 12-22), in which the motif shifts to personified Jerusalem talking about herself. She demanded again that Yahweh look on her distress (v. 20) and that He hear her groaning (v. 22).

Renkema is correct in seeing the center of the poem at verses 11-12.[12] The poet cried out on behalf of Jerusalem for both God and man to look on the devastation Yahweh had wrought on His people. The point of the chapter, Renkema says, is "God/men! Look at our misery."[13] Jerusalem freely admitted her culpability (vv. 14, 18, 20). She also attributed the calamity to Yahweh as just punishment (vv. 12-15, 17-18, 21). But the same God can reverse Himself and bring judgment on the instruments of His wrath, and this is what the poet cried out for Him to do (vv. 21-22).

Through artistic creation of a poem with 22 strophes divided clearly into two equal parts, the poet expressed his despair. Simultaneously he affirmed God's sovereign control of events.

The same pattern is found in chapter 2, which has 22 strophes, each beginning with a different letter of the alphabet. One might expect the pattern of chapter 1 to be repeated in chapter 2. Both poems begin with the same word. Chapter 1 identifies the source of Judah's calamity as Yahweh Himself. In the first half (1:1-11) He is identified as such once (v. 5) and in the second half (vv. 12-22) some six times. In the first half of the second poem (2:1-11), however, there is hardly a verse that omits the attribution (only vv. 10-11). Vivid language is used to describe Yahweh's treatment of His people. He had hurled, swallowed, torn down, cut off, burned, strung His bow, poured out, destroyed, laid waste, rejected, handed over, stretched out a line over, and broken Jerusalem. The writer wanted everyone to understand that the calamitous events of 586 B.C. were not random. No matter how painful, the truth is that Yahweh did these terrible things to His own people. Edom, the archetypical enemy of Israel, is not mentioned until 4:21-22, and Babylon, the human

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point of view: These weepers are probably sons of men who belonged to the old party in power. They are expiating their fathers' sins (Gilbert Brunet, "La Cinquième Lamentation," *Vetus Testamentum* 33 [1983]: 149-70).

[11] See Walter Brueggemann for an excellent discussion of the place of lament in the approach of the lesser member of the covenant to the greater ("The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 [1986]: 57-71).

[12] The language changes at 1:12, thus providing a natural break apart from alphabetic considerations. See Hillers, *Lamentations*, 17, 25, for the outline.

[13] Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations," 297.

perpetrator of the calamity, is not mentioned at all. Only general language is used to refer to Israel's enemies. All must understand that Yahweh had become the enemy of His people.

The first unit closes at 2:10 with a statement summarizing the state of Jerusalem. Starting in verse 11, the writer explained to Judah in gentle but chiding language why the calamity had happened. The misleading message of the false prophets was a major reason for their deception (v. 14), and Yahweh carried out His predicted judgment without equivocation (v. 17).

Since the speech of the writer in the first person makes a logical break in the poem, one might have expected him to have begun speaking in 2:12, if the *aleph* to *kaph* pattern were being followed. A case could be made that the *kaph* and *lamed* strophes (vv. 12-13) form the kernel of the poem with the poignant description of the starving children. However, the delineation is not so clear as in chapter 1 and so cannot be used to support the division of the alphabet as a literary device.

Chapter 3 differs from chapters 1–2 in that the writer speaks in the first person and also is someone other than Jerusalem. The chapter is also different in that, as already stated, each member of each set of three of its 66 lines begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with the 22 sets going successively through the alphabet.[14] The writer presented in chapter 3 classical wisdom teaching on retribution: punishment for sin, but a merciful God who gives relief (3:19-24). The response of the writer in chapter 3 is more like that urged by Job's friends than Job. There are also imprecatory elements in the last portion of the chapter.

The author placed himself in the Jobian mold as one who had suffered at the hands of God (cf. Lam. 3:14 with Job 30:9 and Lam. 3:12 with Job 16:12). Yet unlike Job he did not protest his innocence (Lam. 3:39-40). Echoes of Jeremiah also seem evident (cf. Lam. 3:14 with Jer. 20:7 and Job 12:4). This person is not Zion personified, so who is he? Surely he is the author of Lamentations and one who has personally suffered along with the people. His suffering has been more personal and intense, however. He became a laughing stock of his own people (Lam. 3:14); people tried to kill him by placing him in a pit (vv. 53-57), from which he prayed and God delivered him; people plotted against him (vv. 61-62).[15]

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[14] Renkema argues for a detailed interdependence of the book that is arranged concentrically. Ultimately he focuses on chapter 3 as presenting the main theme of the book ("The Literary Structure of Lamentations," 321-24).

[15] Brunet argues that the first four laments were composed, not by Jeremiah, who was opposed to the corrupt leadership, but by a member of the aristocracy writing between the fall of Jerusalem in 586 and its destruction by Nebuzaradan. He further believes it

After reciting the acts of God against him (3:1-18), the writer argued that people should accept God's punishment with equanimity (vv. 19-30). Each line in the ט (*tet*) strophe (vv. 25-27), beginning with the word "good," speaks of Yahweh's goodness and of the propriety of submitting to Him. The writer amplified this in the י (*yod*) strophe (vv. 28-30) by explaining how the people should humble themselves. This brings the reader to the middle of the poem, in which the lines begin with *kaph* and *lamed*. As if expecting his message to be criticized, the poet wrote three lines each beginning with the word "Because." In these lines he defended the justice of God. They are followed in verses 34-36 by three intensive infinitives, each introduced with a *lamed*. These infinitives assert what Yahweh does not do. He does not crush underfoot, deny a man his rights, or deprive a man of justice. Only the *tet, kaph,* and *lamed* strophes use the same word three times.[16] The *kaph* and *lamed* strophes seem to be the center of the argument. How can Judah raise her head after the awful disaster? God is good, compassionate, and just. This theodicy is then discussed through verse 42. It is followed by a renewed complaint against Yahweh's inaccessibility. The chapter then concludes with an imprecatory statement and prayer (vv. 52-66). Chapter 3, like chapter 1, illustrates the writer's method of dividing the contents of his poems at the halfway point of the alphabet. In this way he artfully drew attention to his central argument that God is gracious.

Chapter 4 is constructed like chapters 1 and 2 except that each verse has two lines rather than three. In the first half of the poem—*aleph* to *kaph*—the writer delineated again the desolate condition of the people of Zion. The punishment of his people, he wrote, was even greater than that of Sodom (v. 6). He concluded the unit by mentioning for the first time in the chapter the name of Yahweh. He "has accomplished His wrath, He has poured out His fierce anger; and He has kindled a fire in Zion which has consumed its foundations" (v. 11). As the *kaph* strophe, this aptly ends the first half of the poem. The *lamed* strophe (v. 12) begins the second half with the statement that no one believed this could happen to Jerusalem. Again the writer stated the reason for the calamity (blaming the prophets and priests) and described the way the lead-

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was the high priest Seraiah who was executed by the Chaldeans after the liquidation of the provisional regime and the destruction of the city (2 Kings 25:18-21; Jer. 52:24-27) (Brunet, "La Cinquième Lamentation," 149-70). However, Jeremiah, not the aristocracy, suffered this way (the priest Pashhur abused Jeremiah by putting him in the stocks, Jer. 20:1-6).

[16] Six strophes each use the same word twice (vv. 7, 9; 19, 20; 29, 30; 43, 44; 49, 51; 59, 60).

ers were ostracized (vv. 13-16). He joined sympathetically with the people in describing their futile hope in other nations (v. 17) and in their own king (v. 20).[17] He ended the strophe with an imprecation on Edom and a breath of hope for Zion (vv. 21-22). The sense break in chapter 4 seems to coincide with the alphabetical break (vv. 1-11 and vv. 12-22). This further exemplifies the writer's tendency to divide the content of a poem in the middle of the alphabet.

Chapter 5 continues to puzzle commentators because it does not use the acrostic system, though it has 22 lines, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Renkema suggests that the phrase in 5:3 "there is no father" (אֵין אָב) is unusual as a singular (orphans, mothers, and widows are all plural) and may be a cryptic way of saying "no aleph, no beth."[18] This is a bit too esoteric to evaluate, and there may be another reason for the lack of an alphabetic acrostic in chapter 5, which will be discussed later. The question now is whether the poem is divided in half like the other chapters.

Chapter 5 emphasizes prayer, thus making an appropriate conclusion to the book. Verse 1 begins with a cry to Yahweh, asking Him to "remember us." It concludes in verse 21 with a prayer for restoration and renewal. In between is another catalog of disaster. The members of the community—orphans, mothers, fathers, slaves, women, virgins, princes, elders, young men, boys—have all been devastated. This leads to verse 18 in which Mount Zion (in destruction language) "lies desolate [and] foxes prowl in it." If there were a sense break in the middle of the chapter, it would occur between verses 11 and 12, but such a break does not seem to be there.

Chapters 1, 3, and 4 seem clearly to be divided in the middle of the alphabet. Possibly chapter 2 also follows this pattern, but it is not as clear. Therefore it may be assumed that the writer deliberately used the split alphabet as one of his devices.

A "Mini-acrostic" in 5:19-20

In 5:19-20 the writer carefully chose his words to summarize the teaching of the entire book, by using the split alphabet to convey it.[19] Verse 19 embraces the first half of the alphabet by using an *aleph* word (אַתָּה, "you") to start the first half of the verse, and a *kaph* word (כִּסֵּא, "throne") to start the second half. This verse reit-

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[17] Some argue that Jeremiah's antipathy toward efforts to acquire Egyptian help and toward King Zedekiah show that Jeremiah could not have written these verses, but he or any other poet may simply have been joining in the lament of the people.

[18] Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations," 365-66.

[19] Hillers refers to verse 19 as a "little hymn-like verse." He says, "Even in the deepest trouble Israel did not forget to hymn God's praises" (*Lamentations*, 105-6).

erates the theology of God's sovereignty expressed throughout the book. He has the right to do as He chooses, humans have no right to carp at what He does. Wisdom teaching grappled with this concept, and God's speech at the end of the Book of Job, which does not really answer Job's many sometimes querulous questions, simply avers that the God of the whirlwind cannot be gainsaid (Job 38–41). Job must accept who God is without criticism. Then Job bowed to this very concept (42:1-6). Now the writer of Lamentations also bowed before the throne of God, accepting the implications of such sovereignty.

Such a theological concept, however, is small comfort in the midst of great distress. Quoting Scripture to a sick or hurting person is little help unless he has drawn personally from the well of biblical doctrine. The writer turned in 5:20 to ask the pragmatic question, "Why dost Thou forget us forever; why dost Thou forsake us so long?" This is the *lamed* ("Why," לָמָּה) to *taw* ("you forsake us," תַּעַזְבֵנוּ) part of the acrostic. Since God is sovereign, why does He not keep His covenant and show kindness? Zion suffers justly, but does her Lord dare let her suffer overmuch? Surely complete abandonment by Him is not in keeping with His sovereign work on behalf of Israel.

So there is an alphabetic device in chapter 5 in the very verses that combine two main themes running through the book: God is sovereign and just, but Zion's suffering is so great. The split alphabet is used here to make a point, as it is used in other chapters. One reason there is no full acrostic in chapter 5 may be that the writer wanted the emphasis to fall on these two verses near the conclusion of the book. In so doing, he has adroitly drawn attention to the only hope for people in despair.

Progression in the Structure

What can be learned from the general configuration of the five poems? Many have noted that chapter 3 with its 66 lines epitomizes the emphasis on hope in the book. One may go a step further and say that the writer was visually showing progression from chapter 1 through chapter 3. It seems that the emphasis of the book is somewhat "level" in chapters 1 and 2, since both chapters have 67 lines with every third line beginning with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.[20] This pattern, however, intensifies in chapter 3, for though it too has 66 lines, each line of the three-line sets carries out the acrostic pattern by beginning with the set's letter of the alphabet. After chapter 3 there is a diminution of emphasis, since chapter 4 has only 44 lines, with the first word of each two-line set beginning

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[20] As stated in note 2, 1:7 and 2:19 have four lines each, thus making a total of 67 lines for both of those chapters.

with a different Hebrew letter. The message then seems to drop to a whisper in chapter 5, in which there are only 22 lines and no acrostic is followed.[21] Since other compositions have 22 lines but not an acrostic, such a structure in chapter 5 is not unusual. However, it seems that the lack of an alphabetic structure (except for the "mini-acrostic" in 5:19-20) in the context of the Book of Lamentations is part of the diminution of chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 3 reaches a crescendo of both despair and hope. The triple lines of the alphabet clang on the reader's ears, crying for him to see the agony of the writer and his people. At the same time strong emphasis is placed on the mercy and goodness of God and the good that will eventually come to those who trust in Him.

In chapter 4 the emphasis drops lower than that of chapters 1–2. The reduced emphasis is not in the content (see 4:10-11) but in the style, and the purpose of the stylistic reduction is itself designed to direct one's thinking in a quieter way to the magnitude of the injustice. Such injustice cries out for vengeance on Edom and for hope for Israel's future (vv. 21-22).

Chapter 5 follows the same reduction pattern. Since no acrostic is followed in that chapter, the tone of the book seems to drop to a whisper. The writer begins with a plea to the Lord to remember, he reiterated the suffering of the people, and then, drew the message of the entire lament together in the "mini-acrostic" in verses 19-20. This provides a dramatic effect for the work and focuses attention on the very issue the writer wanted to emphasize.

The creedal statement of the "mini-acrostic" in 5:19-20 is amplified in 5:21-22. The five-poem lament closes on a strongly negative note, which commentators have struggled to explain. In Jewish liturgy verse 21 is read again after verse 22.

What is the meaning of verse 22? A summary of various answers is given by Hillers[22] and Gordis.[23] Hillers believes verse 22 is restating the facts as they were: God had abandoned His people. Gordis

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[21] Bergler agrees with Bickel that chapter 5 is used simply as the conclusion of the acrostics of chapters 1–4 (S. Bergler, "Threni V—nur ein alphabetisierendes Lied? Versuch einer Deutung," *Vetus Testamentum* 37:3 [1977]: 304-20. Landy, however, says, "The discourse attempts to explain, illustrate, and thus mitigate the catastrophe, to house it in a familiar literary framework; it must also communicate its own inadequacy. Its success, in a sense, depends on its failure. This happens, for example, if a poem fades out in a whimper or an ineffectual cry for revenge, and it has to recognize the silence that exhausts it, the power of the enemy, and the necessity of starting again" (F. Landy, "Lamentations," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode [London: Collins, 1987], 329).

[22] Hillers, *Lamentations*, 100-101.

[23] Robert Gordis, "Critical Notes: The Conclusion of the Book of Lamentations (5:22)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 289-93.

has a similar view as seen in his translation: "Even though you had despised us greatly and were angry with us." He rejects the common translation, "unless you have utterly rejected us," on two grounds: (a) the other uses of the words כי אם in the Hebrew Bible imply a negative response, and (b) the "unless" clause would be an inappropriate assumption at this point in the prayer. However, "unless" does expect a negative response. The sense may be this: "It may look as though You have abandoned us forever, but that contradicts everything we believe about You and so it cannot be true." It is also appropriate in its place as a "ploy" of the suppliant to cause Yahweh to face up to His covenant obligations.

The Reversal of ע ('ayin) and פ (peh)

An unusual feature of three of the acrostic poems is the reversal of the 16th and 17th letters (peh before 'ayin in 2:16-17; 3:46-51; and 4:16-17.[24] This "sphinx" has not yielded its secret in spite of much effort by interpreters. Hillers, after disagreeing with Grotius's explanation that there was a fluctuating order of the alphabet, says that "no more reasonable hypothesis has been advanced."[25]

Wiesmann discusses seven suggestions as to why the order of these letters was inverted.[26] (1) Riegler suggested that the poet simply chose to invert the letters. But, as Wiesmann asks, why would one set out to write an acrostic poem and then not follow the alphabet? Further, why invert only these two letters? (2) Grotius argues that the order of these letters may not have been fixed at that time.[27] However, Wiesmann says, nothing is known of such a

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[24] Kennicott shows that four Hebrew manuscripts have changed 2:16-17 to their normal alphabetical order; two manuscripts have done the same with 3:46-51; and five manuscripts have done so with 4:16-17. There is no evidence that 1:16-17 was changed from the normal order existing in the Masoretic Text to the reversed order of chapters 2-4 (B. Kennicott, *Vetus Testamentum; cum Variis Lectionibus*, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1880]). Ziegler indicates that the Septuagint follows the Masoretic text, but that the inverted units in chapters 2 and 3 have been returned to the correct order in Syh, L', Arm=Pesch (J. Ziegler, *Ieremias, Baruch, Threni, Epistula Ieremiae*, 15 in Septuaginta, Vetus Testamentum Graecum, Auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Gottingensis [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957]). There are no Septuagint variants on 4:16-17. Thus it seems that the *peh* before *'ayin* order in chapters 2-4 is original.

[25] Hillers, *Lamentations*, xxvii.

[26] H. Wiesmann, *Die Klagelieder* (Frankfurt: Philosophischtheologische Hochschule Sankt Georgen, 1954), 32-33.

[27] Provan (*Lamentations*, p. 4) cites Frank Cross ("Newly Found Inscriptions in Old Canaanite and Early Phoenician Scripts," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 238 [1980]: 1-20) for the inversion of these letters in extrabiblical inscriptions. However, the nature of the 'Izbet Sarṭah ostracon precludes its use as an example. Cross himself does not mention the order.

different order of the alphabet. Furthermore, as Hillers points out, the order seems to be already fixed in the alphabet of Ugaritic literature, written some 700 years earlier than Lamentations.[28]

(3) Houbigant, Kennicott, and Jahn attribute the rearrangement to a copyist's error. Wiesmann correctly asks why the same error occurs in three places. Chapter 3 would be especially difficult in that six lines would have to be rearranged. Also the textual evidence, as indicated above, points away from a copyist's error. In addition, a similar inversion occurs in Proverbs 31 and possibly in Psalms 9–10 and 34. (4) Bertholdt, says Wiesmann, argues that the original poet simply made a mistake. Wiesmann argues again that it is difficult to assume the same original mistake in three places. Furthermore, the visual nature of the acrostic makes it difficult for this kind of error to escape the eye. (5) Pareau and Keil see in the change the poet's right to deviate from a fixed form if the content of his material demands it. Wiesmann wonders why the author would not have the ability to fit the content to the alphabetic structure, and Wiesmann also argues again that this would deny the alphabetic pattern the author set out to create. (6) Some argue for a temporary or local fluctuation in the order of the alphabet. The responses to Grotius's position could also be given here. (7) After presenting Boehmer's view that the inversion signifies something about the magic of the alphabet, Wiesmann replies that there is no known significance to the words formed by the inverted order of the two Hebrew letters.[29] Wiesmann maintains that the question of the order of the two letters remains unanswered.[30]

If there was an existing poetic device of inverting the 16th and 17th letters, is there any internal evidence to explain why the writer of Lamentations used it in his work? Gottwald says that the "reversal motif" found in funeral laments is the most dominant theme in the Book of Lamentations. "From the literary viewpoint, it is *dramatic contrast,* and from the theological, it is *tragic reversal.*"[31] He then presents Jahnow's analysis of the funeral songs.[32]

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[28] Hillers, *Lamentations,* xxvii

[29] Wiesmann is not entirely fair with Boehmer's argument (J Boehmer, "Ein alphabetisch-akrostichisches Ratsel und ein Versuch es zu losen," *Zeitschrift für die Altestamentliche Wissenschaft* 28 [1908] 53-57) Boehmer shows that by combining each letter with its following (e g , אב "father", גד, "luck", etc), a meaning can be found everywhere except where ס, ע, פ, and צ occur By inverting *'ayin* and *peh,* meanings can be derived for each form

[30] Wiesmann, *Die Klagelieder,* p 33

[31] Gottwald, *Lamentations,* 53

[32] Hedwig Jahnow, *Das hebraische Leichenlied im Rahmen der Völkerdichtung* (Giessen A Topelmann, 1923)

The praise element in funeral songs describes the person's past glory while the lament element bewails the sadness of the present loss.[33] This is where the theme of "tragic reversal" enters.

Lamentations is complex with respect to all the *gattungen*. The same is true when the funeral lament is discussed, for both the past glory and the present sadness are emphasized. Lamentations advances the funeral song by adding (a) the element of humiliation of Judah in contrast to the exaltation of her enemies and (b) the future exaltation of Judah and the future humiliation of her enemies (cf. Lam. 1:9 and 2:17 with 4:21-22). Gottwald calls this the "reverse of the reversal."

A tentative suggestion about the use of the two reversed Hebrew letters in chapters 2-4 is that the *peh* lines in chapters 2 and 3 (2:16 and 3:46-48) are almost identical in speaking of the enemies opening wide their mouths against Zion. This is the reversal of fortunes spoken of above. The enemies of Judah are now in a superior position. Has the writer reversed the lines here to make that point? The *'ayin* line follows in 2:17 with an assertion that Yahweh caused this reversal and in 3:50 with a plea for Yahweh to take note of what has happened. The *peh* line in 4:16 differs in content from that of chapters 2 and 3, but there is a play on the word "face" (פְּנֵי). The priestly benediction on Israel included the words "May the Lord lift up His face to you and give you peace" (Num. 6:26). In the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, however, God's "face" destroyed His people; further reversal is seen in that the "face" of the priests will not be "lifted up," that is, respected (Lam. 4:16). No other verse in chapter 4 uses the same word twice.

Thus the reversal of *'ayin* and *peh* in Lamentations helps the reader see from the construction as well as the content that Judah's position of favored status with God and victor over her enemies has been reversed.[34]

The artistry of Lamentations has been pressed into the service of practical theology. The trauma of the loss of the temple coupled with the awful suffering of the people during and after the siege resulted in a serious reexamination of faith. The crucible of suffering brought forth both the fine gold of a recognition of God's justice in bringing judgment on Judah, and also a deeply felt lament urging Yahweh to act in accord with His ancient covenant with His people.

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[33] Gottwald, *Lamentations*, 53.

[34] This process theoretically could have begun in the *'ayin* strophe of chapter 1. There the triumph of the enemy is stated (1:16) followed by the futility of Zion's plea (v. 17). The phrase "because of these things" (עַל־אֵלֶּה) gives a conclusion to the preceding section. Perhaps for this reason the writer chose not to invert it.