

“Unless You Have Utterly Rejected Us”: Lamentations as an Instrument of Community Renewal

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Loss of Lament?

“Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being....The greater party (God) is surrounded by subjects who are always ‘yes men and women’ from whom ‘never is heard a discouraging word.’” (Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” 60.)

Post-587 BCE Yahwistic Communities

Babylonian Era (605-539 BCE)

- *Golah* (exile) communities
- *She'erit* (remaining in Judah) communities
- Refugees to Egypt (Jer 42-46) and surrounding peoples

Persian Era (539-330 BCE)

- Eastern Diaspora communities (e.g., Esther)
- Yehud (Province of Judah) community, factions (e.g., Ezra-Nehemiah)
- Egyptian Diaspora communities

Post-587 BCE Yahwistic Communities

Ezekiel 11:16 - “Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I **scattered** them among the countries, yet I have been a **sanctuary** to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.’”

Nehemiah 1:8-9 – “Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will **scatter** you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will **gather** them from there and bring them to the **place that I have chosen**, to make my name dwell there.’”

Lamentations: Facts

- Composed, compiled and edited anonymously
- Between 587 BCE and 539 BCE
- Chapters 1-2, 4-5 have 22 verses each
- Chapter 3 has 66 verses
- Use of *qinah* (dirge) meter
- Part of the Writings, the third section of the Hebrew canon
- One of the five *Megillot*, “little books” read on Jewish holidays (with Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes)

Lamentations: Facts (cont.)

Lam	Features	Characters
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•22 verses, 66 (+1) poetic lines•Acrostic	Daughter Zion, observer
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•22 verses, 66 poetic lines•Acrostic	Daughter Zion, observer
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•66 verses, 66 poetic lines•Triple-acrostic	“The Strongman” (<i>gever</i>)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•22 verses, 44 poetic lines•Acrostic	Daughter Zion, observer
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•22 verses, 22 poetic lines•Non-acrostic	The people

Alphabetic Acrostics

Lamentations 1

1a (א)	How (<i>aychah</i>) lonely sits the city that was full of people;
1b	She has become like a widow, she who was great among the nations;
1c	The princess among the provinces has become a slave.
2a(ב)	She weeps (<i>bakho</i>) bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks;
2b	She has no comforter among all her lovers;
2c	All her friends have betrayed her, becoming her enemies.
3a (ג)	Judah has gone into exile (<i>galatah</i>) because of affliction and much servitude;
3b	She herself dwells among the nations, not finding a place of rest.
3c...	All her pursuers have overtaken her in the midst of her troubles....

Alphabetic Acrostics: A Triple Acrostic

Lamentations 3

1 (א)	I am (<i>ani</i>) the strongman who has seen affliction under his rod of fury;
2 (ב)	It is I (<i>oti</i>) whom he has driven and brought to darkness without light.
3 (ג)	Surely (<i>akh</i>) he has turned against me; he overturns his hand all day long.
4 (ד)	He has worn out (<i>billah</i>) my flesh and my skin; he has broken my bones.
5 (ה)	He has built (<i>banah</i>) against me and surrounded me with bitterness and tribulation.
6 (ו)	He has made me dwell in darkneses (<i>bamachashakhim</i>) as the eternally dead.
7 (ז)	He has walled me in (<i>gadar</i>) so that I cannot go out; he has made my chains heavy.
8 (ח)	Even though (<i>gam</i>) I call and cry out, he shuts out my prayer.
9 (ט)	He has walled up (<i>gadar</i>) my paths with hewn stones; he has twisted my ways.

Sumerian City Laments

c. 2000-1900 BCE:

- Lament Over Ur (LU)
- Lament Over Sumer and Ur (LSUr)
- Lament Over Nippur (LN)
- Lament Over Uruk (LW)
- Lament Over Eridu (LE)
- The Curse of Akkad (CA)

Sumerian City Laments

Community Functions:

- Contributed to social cohesion in the face of catastrophe
- Protest before the gods and the world

Acrostic Protest

Lam 1		Speaker	Addressee
1-8	...		
9	Her uncleanness is in her skirts; she did not remember her end. And so she goes down wonderfully! She has no comforter.	Observer	General
	“ Look (<i>rā’eh</i>), YHWH, at my affliction, for the enemy has become great!”	Daughter Zion!	YHWH
10	...		
11	All her people groan, searching for bread; They give their treasures for food to bring back the soul.	Observer	General
	“ Look (<i>rā’eh</i>), YHWH, and see that I am despised!”		YHWH
12-16	12 “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by on the road? Look (<i>rā’eh</i>) and see whether there is any sorrow like my sorrow...”	Daughter Zion!	Passersby
17	...	Observer	General
18-22	...		Peoples
	20 (<i>resh</i>) “ Look (<i>rā’eh</i>), YHWH, for I am in distress...”	Daughter Zion!	YHWH
	...		

Sumerian City Laments

Community Functions:

- Contributed to social cohesion in the face of catastrophe
- Protest before the gods and the world
- Moving forward, preempting future tragedy

Sumerian City Laments

Elements

- Litany
- Description of the tragedy
- Personal lament by god or goddess
- Accusation of god or goddess
- Prayer for a better future, sometimes fulfilled

Sumerian City Laments

Motifs/Themes

- Completeness and indiscriminacy of the tragedy
- Personification of the city as a weeping goddess
- Breakup of social, religious and family structures
- Hope of regathering and reestablishment as one people

Motifs in Lamentations 1

- Indiscriminate suffering:
 - Priests (1:4)
 - Young women (1:4)
 - Children (1:5)
 - Princes (1:6)
 - The people as a collective (1:7, 11)
- Daughter Zion's children:
 - Warriors and young men (1:15)
 - Desolate children (1:16)
 - Her young men and women (1:18)
 - Her priests and elders (1:19)

Motifs in Lamentations 1

- Daughter Zion's afflicted body as a personification of the community:
 - Nakedness (1:8)
 - Genitals (1:7, 8, 10)
 - Bones and feet (1:13)
 - Neck (1:14)
 - Eyes (1:16)
 - Bowels (1:20)
 - Heart (1:20, 22)
- Daughter Zion's scattered children:
 - In exile or captivity (1:3, 5, 7, 18)
 - Perished in the city or the countryside (1:15, 19-20)
 - Surviving *she'erit* among the ruins (1:4)
 - Other elites have fled (1:6)

Echoes of Lamentations in Isaiah 40-55

- The poets of Lamentations repeatedly ask of Daughter Zion, “Who can console (*nacham*) you?” (Lam 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21; 2:13; cf. Isa 51:19)
- Isaiah 40-55 insists that God is the consoler (*menachem*) of Israel (Isa 40:1, 49:13, 51:3, 12; 52:9; 54:11).
- “Whenever Zion’s lament of comfortlessness is answered in [Isaiah 40-55], the assurance is accompanied by other reversals of language and imagery of Lamentations, creating a density of reference that can hardly be considered coincidental.” (Willey, *Remember the Former Things*, 132)

Lamentations

2:10 The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown **dust** on their heads and put on **sackcloth**; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the **ground**.

1:8b All who honored her despise her, for they have seen her **nakedness**.

Isaiah 47

47:1 Come down and sit in the **dust**, virgin daughter Babylon! Sit on the **ground** without a throne, daughter Chaldea! For you shall no more be called tender and delicate.

47:5 **Sit** in silence, and go into darkness, daughter Chaldea! For you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms.

47:2 Take the millstones and grind meal, remove your **veil**, strip off your **robe**, **uncover** your legs, pass through the rivers.

47:3 Your **nakedness** shall be uncovered, and your shame shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one.

Lamentations

1:2b Among all her lovers she has no one to comfort (*nacham*) her.

5:20 Why have you forgotten (*shakhach*) us completely? Why have you forsaken (*`azav*) us these many days?

2:20b Should women eat their offspring, the children they have borne?

1:1ab How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!

Isaiah 49

49:13b For the LORD has comforted (*nacham*) his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

49:14 But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken (*`azav*) me, my Lord has forgotten (*shakhach*) me."

49:15 Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

49:21 Then you will say in your heart, "Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away-- so who has reared these? I was left all alone-- where then have these come from?"

Lamentations

3:25 The LORD is good to those who wait (*qawah*) for him, to the soul that seeks him.

3:58 You have taken up my cause (*riv*) O Lord, you have redeemed (*ga'al*) my life.

4:10 The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of my people.

Isaiah 49 (cont.)

49:23b Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait (*qawah*) for me shall not be put to shame.

49:25b For I will contend (*riv*) with those who contend (*riv*) with you, and I will save your children.

49:26b Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer (*ga'al*), the Mighty One of Jacob.

49:26a I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.

Reintegration in Isaiah 49

- Exiles - 49:5, 9, 12, 18, 22
- *She'erit* - 49:6, 8, 19-20
- The refugees - 49:5, 9, 12, 18, 22

Lamentations

1:8b All who honored her despise her, for they have seen her **nakedness**.

1:9a Her uncleanness was in her **skirts**; she took no thought of her future;

1:10 Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things; she has even seen the nations invade (*bo'*) her sanctuary (*miqdash*), those whom you forbade to **enter** (*bo'*) your congregation.

2:10 The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown **dust** on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the **ground**.

3:28-29 [It is good] to **sit** alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, to put one's mouth to the **dust** (there may yet be hope),

1:14 My transgressions were **bound** into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they weigh on my **neck**, sapping my strength; the Lord handed me over to those whom I cannot withstand.

Isaiah 52:1-2

52:1a Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful **garments**, O Jerusalem, the holy (*qodesh*) city.

52:1b For the uncircumcised and the unclean shall **enter** (*bo'*) you no more.

52:2a Shake yourself from the **dust**, rise up, O captive Jerusalem.

52:2b Loose the **bonds** from your **neck**, O captive daughter Zion!

Who Is to Blame?

- Judah? - 1:5, 8
- Babylon? - 1:10
- Edom? - 4:21-22

- YHWH! - especially 2:1-8; 2:20; 5:22

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