

INTRODUCTION TO LAMENTATIONS

by
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Note: Author's introduction in *A Homiletic Commentary on the Book of Lamentations* (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1891). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

Name. All literatures--Hebrew, English, and the rest--bear witness to forces with which sorrowful emotions press for utterance. Hence comes the ancient and widespread custom of making public recognition of the decease of famous or beloved persons, of the disasters of cities and countries. Speeches or orations more or less eloquent, poems more or less deep-toned, are handed along the centuries and remind the readers that man's state in every land is shadowed by cloud of dark and mournful hue. The Hebrew people were exposed to many such sad and sunless times, perhaps more awful than have overtaken any other people, and the "almost unalloyed expression of unrestrained anguish and utter inconsolable desolation" given by this book may be taken as proof thereof. No wonder that it is commonly called "*The Lamentations.*"

It is not classified in ordinary Hebrew Bibles by this term. There it is denominated Aicah, the Hebrew equivalent to "How," which is the first word of the book. Rabbinical writers have styled it Qinoth. That is the word which denotes the ode composed by David on the death of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:17), as also similar compositions elsewhere in the Old Testament. It is also employed in 2 Chron. 35:25, where it is recorded, *And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations (qinoth) unto this day; and they made them an ordinance in Israel; and, behold they are written in the lamentations (qinoth).*

Some expositors hold that the five elegies collected in this book are those lamentations on Josiah's death. Others, seeing the unlikelihood of this, aver that the fourth chapter is identical with the dirges of Jeremiah. Against this stands the fact that that event, instead of being the refrain of the elegy, receives but the slightest allusion, if it is an allusion at all (4:20). It seems more reasonable to suppose that the lamentations of the prophet and singers over Josiah's death have not been transmitted to us, as other portions of ancient Hebrew literature have not. For, assuredly, the references of this elegiac collection are to casualties far more painful and depressing than the removal of the noblest of kings, and truly fit to give the name to this book during succeeding centuries.

Form. The book is poetical and unusually technical in its framework. In other Biblical poetical books the usual division into chapters and verses is not always made according to the structure, and sometimes even breaks into the sense of a passage. In Lamentations there are no untoward separations. Its five chapters are five distinct odes or elegies, and each ode is divided into twenty-two parts regulated by the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, the verses of the first four chapters following, on the whole, the order of the alphabet. Thus:

Chap. 1. Each verse, while beginning with a word which has a letter of the alphabet in the

grammatical order, is constituted of three double clauses.

Chap. 2. Constructed similarly to chap. 1, except that the letter seventeenth in the normal order is placed before the sixteenth--a course which is kept up in the two succeeding chapters.

Chap. 3. Differs from the two preceding in having three double clauses, each of which is made a verse in our English versions, beginning with the same letter of the alphabet.

Chap. 4. Takes a structure like that of chap. 2, with the exception of having only two double clauses in every verse.

Chap. 5. Is divided as the others into twenty-two verses, but the verses do not put their initial words in the order of the alphabet.

No satisfactory explanation has been suggested for the variation of the order of the alphabet in chapters 2, 3, and 4. Difference from that order is found also in Psalms 34 and 145.

The technicality or artificiality of the form is plain. And it is as plain that it would be next to impossible to present that formal structure in a translation and at the same time do justice to the original. Merely as an illustration of the *form* of the book, the first two verses of chapter 3 are appended:

1. Affliction, by the rod of His wrath, I am the man that hath seen.
And He hath led me, caused me to walk in darkness, not in light.
Against me surely He turneth His hand, again and again all the day.
2. Broken my bones hath He, and made old my flesh and skin.
Builded against me hath He, and compassed me with gall and travail.
By dark places hath He made me to dwell, as those that have been ever dead.

Certain suggestions made to account for this technical form are hardly to be entertained, *e.g.*, that it is a sign of a simulated grief; a product of later and degenerated taste or of a declining art; the resource of a poet who is inferior in spiritual feeling; a means of joining in sentences thoughts which are only loosely related to each other. Is it not rather the token that a grief which had benumbed the faculty of expression has passed the emotional stage and begins to traverse the reflective? There, in the effort to express itself in a peculiar form, it finds a counteractive to its masterful depression. Why should we ascribe this to unreal emotion, or to decadence of art, or to inferiority of faculty any more than we should ascribe the peculiar form of "In Memoriam" to either of these influences?

May not the intensest feelings find utterance in an elegy which employs the order of an alphabet in the beginning of its lines as well as in an ode of Horace, which uses long and short syllables in unvarying succession, or as in a sonnet of Shakspeare employing words of the same sound at the end of certain lines? Surely a deep sorrow can find a distraction in putting its phases into special verbal form, whether that form shows itself at the end of lines (as in English) or all through the lines (as in Latin) or at the beginning of lines (as in this and other specimens of Hebrew literature). "Tersely and vividly, thought after thought shaped itself round each letter of the alphabet in order, while in the effort the writer found relief for

his anguish."

Contents. The Jewish historian Josephus makes the statement that "Jeremiah composed a dirge for Josiah's funeral, which remains unto this day." Does this prove that he identified that dirge with this series of dirges? It is, to say the least, doubtful. If it is a valid proof, there can be little hesitation in regarding Josephus as mistaken. Each chapter of the Lamentations might be adduced in evidence that it was penned under the pressure of grief, not for a deceased sovereign, but for a prostrated kingdom--for an utterly ruined metropolis; for the covenant people disgraced, outraged, captives, in despair. Again and again are the wretched conditions sketched in the most sombre colours, and, to the eyes of a distant age, with a sort of monotony tending to irksomeness. For "sorrow is distasteful to those who are not suffering it." A cursory glance at the several chapters is all that is needed here.

In the *first* the lamentation is chiefly over the desolated city, and the people plundered, starved, and carried into captivity amid the taunts and brutality of the enemy.

In the *second* it is the wrath of Jehovah taking vengeance upon the persistent sins of His people which is depicted. Herein the sweeping away of means of worship, the terrible anguish of men and women, mothers and their little children, the hopelessness of all human effort, and the imperious need of pleading the mercy of the Lord, are portrayed.

In the *third* the form of the subject matter is diverse from that of the other chapters. A thoughtful reader will notice a characteristic feature, the bearing of which he will desire to understand. It is that the writer seems to speak largely of his own personal experiences, occasionally sinking his own under those of others. He begins with the outburst, *I am the man that has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath*, and continues in the same manner to the verge of despair. Then, as in a more illustrious case, he realizes that when he is weak he is really strong, and for a moment there is hope and a vision of a wider area: *It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed*. His own case is again referred to (ver. 24), only, however, as a momentary step towards embracing the Israel of God who trust on Him (vers. 25-39). Here the impersonal is left, and again (vers. 40-47) the associated community makes known its aims and hardships: *Let us search and try our ways*. Once more, to the end of the chapter, it is the individual who laments and implores recompense.

How is this interchange of persons to be accounted for here, as also in certain portions of other poetical parts of the Scriptures? Assuredly by the supposition that the consciousness of the writer testifies to him that his sufferings are representative of his nation's sufferings, or as Cheyne says, "of those of the pious believers who formed the kernel of the Israelitish people." Accepting this representativeness, we perceive why the expressions of sadness and dismay are such as go beyond mere individual experience, or are such as can be predicted only of an individual who felt as if the whole burden of the tribulation was laid upon himself. It is ever thus with hearts that are sensitive to the visitations of trouble which they share in common with others, and it becomes hard to distinguish the personal from the collective sorrows and pains.

In the *fourth*, gruesome details of the calamities which had overtaken all classes--matrons and young children, princes and nobles, prophets and priests--are outlined; outlines which show the hand of an eyewitness. It concludes with an appeal to and a denunciation of

Edom, the age-long, bitter adversary of Judah.

The *fifth* begins with a prayer and then proceeds to draw up something like a list of the errors and outrages which had characterized the national history. It closes with a hesitating call upon Jehovah to turn the people to Himself and restore their ancient glory.

From such a view of the contents Keil suggests one may "readily perceive in these poems a well-cogitated plan in the treatment of the material common to the whole, and a distinct progress in the execution of this plan." This may be open to doubts. If earlier expositors failed to affix the contents of the different elegies to the different leading features of the Chaldean invasion--the siege, the capture, the desolation of the Temple, city, and land--the attempt of Keil, or any other, also fails to make clear a definite plan and progression molding the whole. Whatever be the connection of one chapter with another, it is the connection of a common subject rather than a connection formed by the order of thought. Besides that, there seems no other clue needed to thread our way. The exposition must be the exposition of separate poems; at any rate not of a drama with five acts, as the imagination of Ewald makes out the contents to form.

In contrast with opinions already referred to regarding the poetical vigor of this book, that of one who cannot be ranked as a poor judge of poetry--the late Dean of St. Paul's, Milman--may be cited. In his *History of the Jews* he says, "Never was ruined city lamented in language so exquisitely pathetic. Jerusalem is, as it were, personified, and bewailed with the passionate sorrow of private and domestic attachment. While the more general pictures . . . are successively drawn with all the life and reality of an eyewitness." It may be interesting to present a specimen of the manner in which the Dean translates the original (from chap. 5).

Remember, Lord, what hath befallen,
Look down on our reproach:
Our heritage is given to strangers,
Our home to foreigners.
Our water have we drank for money;
Our fuel hath its price.

Princes were hung up by the hand,
And age had no respect.
Young men are grinding at the mill,
Boys faint 'neath loads of wood.
The elders from the gate have ceased,
The young men from their music.

The crown is fallen from our head,
Woe! woe! that we have sinned.
'Tis therefore that our hearts are faint,
Therefore our eyes are dim,
For Zion's mountain desolate;
Foxes walk on it."

Author. The name of no author is attached to the book or to any of its separate elegies. In Hebrew MSS. and Bibles the book generally appears in the third division of the canonical

books of the Old Testament called K'thubim, between Ruth and Ecclesiastes. This is no criterion as to its authorship; for "the Lamentations, as being lyrical poetry, are classed, not with prophecies, but with the Psalms and Proverbs," according to the understood arrangement of the canon by the Jews. It is an old and concurrent tradition to name the prophet Jeremiah as the sole author. This tradition is formulated by the Septuagint translator. He prefaces the book with words which are not found in any extant Hebrew MS., *And it came to pass, after Israel had been carried captive and Jerusalem was desolated, Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said, How, &c.*

Whatever be the historical worth of this statement, the ascription to Jeremiah is backed up by Josephus and the Talmudical writers. Such testimonies have been accepted by subsequent students until a comparatively recent period. Indeed, it is only within the present century that anything like material objections have been made to the traditional belief.

The gravity of these objections may be measured by the consideration that it is principally derived from the words and style of the poems. And the operations of such attempts are far from uniform. "The absence of certain specific Jeremianic peculiarities," which Schrader adduces, is counterbalanced by his own acknowledgment of its affinity in contents, spirit, tone, and language with Jeremiah's prophecies. Keil represents Naegelsbach (in Lange's series) as having "with the help of the concordance, prepared a table of those words and forms of words found in Lamentations, but not occurring in the prophecies of Jeremiah," and so concluding against the authorship of the prophet. On the other hand, Dr. Hornblower (translator of Naegelsbach) and Keil present the evidence of passages in contradiction of Naegelsbach's conclusion. Attributing the book to Ezekiel may be looked on as an exhibition of ingenuity and not of convincing effect.

Besides this, there is extreme diversity of opinion regarding the composition of the separate odes. Ewald maintains that "every competent judge will ascribe [these five poems] to only one poet." Thenius assures us that chaps. 2 and 4 are "undeniably from Jeremiah," chaps. 1 and 3 from some unknown resident in Judæa, and chap. 5 from the leader of a band of wanderers seeking an asylum. Cheyne is sure that the first, second, and fourth chapters are not the productions of Jeremiah; that the third chapter is by a different author from these, probably by one who was acquainted with Jeremiah's prophecies; and the fifth chapter "very certainly not by the author of any of the foregoing Lamentations," though he regards it as probable that "Jeremiah was the favourite book of these poets (next to the Psalter, so far as this book was in existence)."

To pronouncements on such precarious evidence there can be but one fair attitude--that of suspense, until more definite contingents than those represented by words and style are forthcoming. For this sort of evidence is by no means conclusive either for or against the genuineness of any writings. It may or may not be important as it is related to other conditions. It may betoken different authors, or it may be the same author in altered circumstances of thought and life. His age, new events, the limitations of his subject, his purpose in writing--each one of these will be a modifying element in his choice and allocation of words.

It is therefore unwise and hazardous to assert positively whether Jeremiah was the author or not, unless we can decide, approximately at any rate, how he and his style would be affected

by the points just referred to. This has not been done; and until something of this kind is done, the tradition that Jeremiah is the author of all or chief part of the Lamentations is entitled to preference. It is indeed little matter who the writer or writers might be when they are moved by the Spirit of God.

There is one topic yet unnoticed which may be a difficulty in the way of accepting the traditional belief, and it is raised by that artificial *form* of the Lamentations already described. Could that form have been given them so close to the occurrence of the fearful calamities as Jeremiah must have been? Could he, with his intense sensitiveness to the sins and miseries of his fellow-countrymen, have sat (as tradition reports) among the ruinous heaps of Jerusalem and in sight of the fiery ordeal through which his ill-treated people were passing, busied himself with the technicalities of poetic art? Must not the condition for the composition of such poems be not that of perturbation but of reflectiveness? Are not the mitigations of time requisite, has not the emotion already parted with its overwhelming vehemence, before downcast men will care to express their grief in peculiar forms? "We are recovering from love or grief or any other passion when are are able to rhyme on it with elegance" (*Daily News*, in review of "Poems of Afghanistan").

This may be true, but there is another view. In poignant trouble a short time may appear long; and the words, *Wherefore dost thou forsake us so long time?* (5:20) are not so decisive as to settle the question whether a longer or shorter period had intervened between the desolation of Jerusalem and the production of the elegies. "We should count time by heart-throbs." In reference to this Cheyne quotes from "The Dream of Gerontius":

... time is not a common property;
But what is long is short, and swift is slow.
And near is distant as received and grasped
By this mind and by that, and every one
Is standard of his own chronology

Thus the element of time brings no ingredient to solve the riddle of authorship. It cannot eliminate the claim of Jeremiah. He could have written the five poems so far as his intense sorrow was concerned. There is much force in a remark made by Riehm: "In lyric poetry proper the employment of this artificial form is naturally and intrinsically justified only when a single fundamental strain, that fills the whole soul of the poet,--deep, strong, and sustained--seeks to die away in many different forms of chords."

Date. There is no chronological record as to the time of composition except that which is involved in the fact that the awfulness of the desolation was fresh in the writer's mind. And if he was not Jeremiah, he, or they who wrote, may be supposed to have written under the impulse of "a great lyric movement," which Ewald conceives took place "among the conquered Jews, as well those in Babylon as those who remained in their much-loved home." And he believes the Lamentations came into their existing form coincident with that movement. But beyond all such considerations it is to be remembered that the thought which the writer or writers wanted to present was in no sense dependent on a date.

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Purport. The elegies issue out of the preceding history of the Jewish people and thus stand

related to other portions of the sacred Scriptures, even if the points of contact appear to us under a haze. They are resonant with chords formed by the claims of God, who *makes judgment the line and righteousness the plummet* in His dealings with men. They signify that moral decadence is in closest alliance with religious compromises; that rueful calamities seize on a nation which swerves from its normal position; that if a people favoured by God, Creator and King, stand in the way of the knowledge of His saving health among all nations, down that people must go no matter what it has been in His procedure hitherto.

This result would be promoted by the repetitions of ideas and even expressions which are frequent throughout the book. Such a feature certainly detracts from its literary finish, but we must suppose that the author did not give heed to that. He might have managed to improve its symmetry if he had tried. Obviously he did not try. He had an end in view which a finished literary form would not have brought him to so well as the redundant form he has adopted. And, if we dare define what his aim was, we should say that he wanted to portray an impressive picture of a country, people, worship, God-forsaken because God-forsaking. The unusual structure of the book also would tend to deepen this impression. Thus an enduring symbol was erected of that long course of scatterings and wanderings, of insults and oppressions, which was to be trod by the Jewish tribes.

At any rate the Great Revealer was opening up, by these outbursts of grief, some fresh aspect of His character and purpose--intimating that He had brought to a further stage the discipline and development of Israel, with whom He had entered into covenant; and was forging a new link, into which another link in due course would be welded, so as to extend the outstretch of that chain which should lift the world into a wider life. Then, *when the fulness of the time came*, Jesus Christ, who searched the Scriptures (as He directed others to do), found His sympathy stirred in unison with these Lamentations: *When He saw the city He wept over it*, because its enemies should not leave one stone upon another, and because it knew not the time of its visitation.

The prophecies of Ezekiel, not a few of which must have been contemporaneous with the publication of the Lamentations, have one ever-recurring refrain: *And they shall know that I am Jehovah*. Since that was the goal towards which all the changes of that time were leading men, and as this book pointed in the same direction, we may have a valid presentiment that it helped towards the formation of the new spirit which pervaded the Jews *when the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion*. They had voiced their laments here, their prayers in such a Psalm as the seventy-fourth, and then followed their praise: *The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad*.