

# **Community, Complaint, and Catharsis:**

## **The Emotional Arc of the Persona Shifts in Lamentations**

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Old Testament—Prophets

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The Book of Lamentations, though short, is one of the most fascinating and complex collections of poetry in the Bible. Though some older interpreters (like Calvin) seem to have been mostly oblivious to the fact, many recent scholars noticed the complex web of personas that the author adopts in order to express his feelings and his message. It is unsurprising that a text so visibly polyphonous, and seemingly at cross-purposes with itself, would hold great attraction for literary scholarship steeped in deconstructionism and postmodern textual criticism, and indeed, a number of monographs from that general perspective have emerged over the past few years. In this paper, I will borrow willingly from the insights of this sort of approach, and the complexities it reveals in the text, while also trying to temper it with a proper respect for the way the Bible presents and interprets itself. My approach in dealing with the shifting voices and perspectives in the work shall try to navigate between to erroneous approaches to the text. It is possible to see the text too statically, seeing the various laments simply as one long lament by the prophet expressing his grief at Jerusalem's fall. Calvin, perhaps, is guilty of this, failing to take note of obvious shifts such as a move from third-person description to first-person outcry. On the other hand, some more modern interpreters have eagerly read into the various voices of the poem conflicting viewpoints which may or may not follow Biblical ways of thinking about suffering and lamentation (a brief summary and critique of some of these interpretations appears below). I shall suggest that the shifting voices are indeed significant for the author and represent a variety of perspectives on Israel's suffering, but are employed by Jeremiah in thoughtful sequence which points to a mature response to the suffering. This progression might be described as Jeremiah's attempt to guide Zion through the stages of grief, though in no crassly pop-psychological sense. I do not attempt to make sense of the logic underlying every shift in voice, but hope to account for the overall trajectory. Nor do I mean to suggest that this is the

only valid reading of the book; though I consider it valid, I know that the poet is up to a great deal more than I could cover in 15 pages.

My approach shall be a bit disjointed, but I hope that a method may be perceived in my madness. First, I shall offer a general survey of the scope and complexity of the polyphony in Lamentations, and the insufficient attempts some scholars have made to classify it; I shall then make a couple of insufficient attempts myself. Then, I shall offer a brief structural/thematic commentary on each chapter of Lamentations in succession, during the course of which some larger patterns will begin to emerge. Then, I shall return to the abandoned attempt to provide an overarching account of the book of Lamentations, sketching a fairly coherent argument based on the foregoing observations from each chapter.

So, first, how complex is this issue we are seeking to address? Well, it depends whom you consult. Some older commentators, like John Calvin or Keil and Delitzsch pay little attention to the shifts in voice. Keil and Delitzsch attempt a thematic division of the book, relying strictly on the chapter divisions, seeing the first as focusing on the desolation of the city, the second as focusing on God's wrathful judgment, the third on the spiritual sufferings of God's people and the justice of God, the fourth on the suffering as a result of the people's sins, and the fifth as an entreaty for relief from the Lord.<sup>1</sup> The general contours of this are a fairly accurate representation of the thematic shifts, but they fail to illustrate the progression from one theme to another, which I shall try to do later on. Much more seriously, they pay no attention to the constant shifts in voice and perspective, which are so curious and so blatant that we should assume that they are literarily and thematically significant, rather than merely

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<sup>1</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 8: Jeremiah/Lamentations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 465.

incidental, unless proved otherwise. A little later in their commentary, Keil and Delitzsch do take note of a couple of the shifts in voice, but make little of them.

If we were to take them into account, the simplest reading might represent Lamentations as containing an alternation of an objective narrative voice and then a first-person personification, where the prophet takes on the perspective of suffering Jerusalem. This, however, fails to take account of all the variations, since it is far from clear that all the uses of the first-person singular are meant to be from the same perspective (and the same goes for the various inflections of the third-person voice), and does not distinguish the uses of a first-person plural perspective. David Dorsey, in his exhaustive *Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, adopts a structuring approach based almost entirely on the predominant grammatical form in each section, and ends up with the following chiasm:

A she—Zion—is desolate and devastated (1:1-11b)

B. I—Zion—was betrayed and defeated (1:11c-22)

C. He—Yahweh—has caused this (2:1-10)

D. They—mothers, children, princes, maidens—suffer (2:11-17)

E. You—Zion—should cry out to Yahweh (2:18-22)

F. He—Yahweh—has afflicted me (3:1-20)

G. Center: Yahweh's great love (3:21-5)

F.' He—Yahweh—has afflicted men (3:26-39)

E.' You—O Yahweh—to you we cry out (3:40-66)

D.' They—mothers, children, princes, maidens—suffer (4:1-10)

C.' He—Yahweh—has caused this (4:11-16)

B.' We—Zion—were betrayed and defeated (4:17-22)

A.' We—Zion—are desolate and devastated (5:1-22)<sup>2</sup>

While helpful in many ways, there are a number of problems with this structure. First of all, the focus on using the single most dominant grammatical form in each passage as the structuring criterion misses the fact that most of the sections contain an interplay between two dominant grammatical forms—a subject and an object. For example in “A” the focus is on Zion (3fs) oppressed by the enemies (3p), while in “B” it is on “me” (1s) oppressed by Yahweh (3ms, and then, for a few verses, 2s). I will argue that shifts in both of these voices constitute important structural and thematic signposts. Dorsey also misrepresents sections to try to stuff them into his chiastic ordering; for example, F.' speaks of the man who bears the yoke in his youth for a few verses, and only then about the Lord, and D.' and C.' are not clearly distinct, as the primary focus (the suffering people of Jerusalem—3p) remains the same throughout both, and Yahweh's agency is not particularly highlighted in vs. 11-16.

William F. Lanahan, in his article “The Speaking Voice of Lamentations,” does a better job than Dorsey in taking account of the tone and content of each speaking voice, rather than simply lumping together based on grammatical form, but I am afraid he oversimplifies somewhat in the process. Lanahan argues for five distinct voices, or *personas*, in Lamentations.<sup>3</sup> The first, he says, is the passer-by observing Jerusalem and commenting on her distress in the third person<sup>4</sup>; the second is the personification of Jerusalem, speaking of her affliction in the first person<sup>5</sup>; the third, appearing in chapter 3, is that of a defeated

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<sup>2</sup> David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 251.

<sup>3</sup> William F. Lanahan, “The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (Mar. 1974), 41

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

soldier, embittered at his superiors who have led him into defeat<sup>6</sup>; the fourth voice is similar to the first, but is a more “bourgeois observer” concerned with the economic and social upheaval<sup>7</sup>; the fifth is a choral voice, the community of Jerusalem crying out to the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, for him, the book looks something like this:

1:1-11b: Voice 1: Reporter

1:11c-11: Voice 2: Zion

2:1-19: Voice 1: Reporter

2:20-22: Voice 2: Zion

3:1-66: Voice 3: Soldier

4:1-22: Voice 4: Bourgeois reporter

5:1-22: Voice 5: Community of Jerusalem

I think Lanahan’s analysis is perceptive in some regards, and is perhaps right not to be sidetracked by every shift in grammatical voice. For example, in chapter 2, the author transitions from third person to first person in verse 11, and then begins to speak to Jerusalem in second person; it is quite fair, however, to view all of these shifts as taking place within the same persona, that of the reporter observing Jerusalem’s travail, and this is how Lanahan takes it. On the other hand, I think Lanahan’s simplifications miss some crucial shifts. For example, Zion’s shift from a lament to an appeal to Yahweh in 1:20 seems fairly important. More seriously, Lanahan’s division takes no note of the shift from third-person reporter to first-person plural in chapter 4—it would make sense for him to lump the latter in with his choral voice of chapter 5, but he does not. Worst of all, his attempt to make all 66 verses of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 49.

the extraordinarily complex chapter 3 appear as the words of a single persona misses many crucial shifts in this chapter.

I've spoken of "oversimplifying" a few times here, so let me go ahead and sketch the full complexity. A pretty thorough catalogue (though still ignoring certain interjections of one voice into a section dominated by another) of the various shifts in speaker and object, would reveal the following divisions:

1:1-11b: Jerusalem (she) is the focus—prophet is observing and lamenting her sufferings, which have been brought upon her by external enemies (they)

1:11c-22: the prophet (I) is the focus, he is lamenting his sufferings as a representative of Israel

1:11c-19: Yahweh (he) is the enemy who is smiting him

1:18-22: Yahweh (you) is appealed to for aid against enemies (them)

2:1-9: Yahweh (he) is the focus, and his judgments against the people of Jerusalem (them) are described vividly by the prophet in third person

2:10-12: People of Jerusalem (they) are the focus, and their sufferings, spoken of generally, are observed by the Prophet (I)

2:13-19: People of Jerusalem (you) are the focus; Jeremiah describes to them what they have suffered from their enemies (they), and, in v. 17, from God (he)

2:20-22: Yahweh (you) is the focus; the Prophet describes to Him what he has done to him (me), as a personification of the people

3:1-20: ?Jeremiah? (I) is the focus, and the sufferings that God (he) has inflicted on him

3:21-25: The faithfulness of Yahweh (he) is the focus.

3:26-30: The good man (he) is the focus

3:31-39: The faithfulness of Yahweh (he) is the focus)

3:40-47: The people of Israel (we) are the focus, and their suffering

3:40-2: “Let us return to the Lord”

3:43-7: Yahweh (you) has punished us

3:48-66: Focus is on Jeremiah (I), his sufferings, caused by enemies (they), from whom Yahweh (you) will save him

4:1-16: Focus is on people of Jerusalem (they), and their sufferings, spoken of generally, but occasionally as caused by Yahweh (he)

4:17-20: Focus is on people of Israel (we), and how the enemies (they) have hunted them

4:21-22: Focus is on Israel and Edom (you)—you, Edom, will be punished, you, Israel, will be redeemed.

5:1-22: Focus is on people of Jerusalem (we) and their sufferings, spoken of generally, but occasionally as caused by enemies, and on how Yahweh (you) will redeem them

This could be diagrammed as follows (where the number represents grammatical person and Z represents Zion, J represents Jeremiah, P represents the people of Jerusalem, Y represents Yahweh, and E represents the enemies):

1:1-11b: 3Z is afflicted by 3E

1:11c-19: 1Z is afflicted by 3Y

1:20-22: 1Z appeals to 2Y for aid against 3E

2:1-9: 3P are afflicted by 3Y

- 2:10-12: 3P are afflicted, observed by 1J
- 2:13-19: 2P are afflicted by 3E and 3Y
- 2:20-22: 1Z appeals to 2Y, blames him
- 3:1-20: 1J is afflicted by 3Y
- 3:21-25: 3Y is faithful
- (3:26-30: description of the good man)
- 3:31-39: 3Y is faithful
- 3:40-2: 1P appeal to 3Y
- 3:43-7: 1P are afflicted by 2Y
- 3:48-66: 1J is appeals to 2Y for aid against 3E
- 4:1-16: 3P are afflicted by 3Y
- 4:17-20: 1P are afflicted by 3E
- 4:21-22: 2E will be punished
- 5:1-22: 1P appeal to 2Y for mercy

I challenge any reader to discern an overall pattern dictating this sequence. I must confess I made a good sporting attempt at deriving a chiasm, but it took more creativity than even I am willing to display here, and seemed in the end untenable. Certainly some patterns emerge, which will be discussed more as I go through chapter by chapter, but I am doubtful, over against Dorsey, that a single unified structure, especially a chiastic one, can be built off of all of the voice changes in Lamentations without major oversimplification.

One particular criterion that seems significant and might be selected as an ordering principle is the part played by Yahweh—you will see from the above that Yahweh sometimes appears as an enemy, afflicting the people, sometimes as an advocate to be appealed to, and

sometimes is not really in the picture. The variations of attitude towards Yahweh are significant for understanding the progression of thought in the lament, and I shall discuss a number of them as they come up in my synopsis below. An apparent recurring (imperfect) chiastic pattern of this can be derived without too much creativity, but I leave it to the reader to judge whether this pattern is simply imaginary (note that some of the section breaks here end up a bit different than above):

- 1:1-11: Yahweh out of the picture
  - 1:12-19: Yahweh as enemy
    - 1:20-22: Yahweh as advocate
- 2:1-9: Yahweh as enemy
  - 2:10-16: Yahweh out of the picture
    - 2:17-22: Yahweh as enemy
- 3:1-20: Yahweh as enemy
  - 3:21-39: Yahweh as advocate
    - 3:40-45 Yahweh as enemy
- 3:46-54: Yahweh out of the picture
  - 3:55-66: Yahweh as advocate
- 4:1-16 Yahweh as enemy
  - 4:17-20: Yahweh out of the picture
    - 4:21-5:22: Yahweh as advocate

Whatever the merits of the above, it only shows one aspect of the perspective shifts, and ignores all of the changes in speaker. So, if the various voice shifts are not serving to anchor an overall structure for the book, what might their function be? Well, for one thing,

the constant shifts in voice serve to dramatize the grief and chaos of Jerusalem's fall. If Jeremiah had continued in the simple third-person lament of 1:1-11 all the way through, it would get old pretty quick and would fail to convey the intensity of emotion and distress that the poet is suffering. The 3<sup>rd</sup> person observer of Jerusalem's suffering can focus on the appalling visual scene, while, when Jeremiah shifts into a first-person personification of Jerusalem, he can convey the inner emotions of the suffering better. The ambiguity of Jerusalem's relationship to Yahweh is also brought into sharper relief by these constant shifts in perspective—Jeremiah can represent Jerusalem's bitterness against her enemies, but also against Yahweh as her ultimate Enemy, yet at the same time recognizing that His punishment is just, and that only by appeal to Him can she hope to receive aid against her earthly enemies. The dynamic interaction between the order of the acrostic structure and the disorder of the voice shifts keeps a constant tension of restrained and unrestrained grief throughout the sequence of poems. Each letter of the alphabet in the acrostic has three poetic lines assigned to it (two in chapter 4), and some of the voice shifts occur right in the middle of an acrostic triad (e.g. 1:11). The acrostic structure is strongest (each letter thrice repeated) in chapter 3, which is the most chaotic in terms of voice shifts, and is entirely lacking in chapter 5, which appears to speak with a unified voice the entire time.

The emotional complexity introduced by the voice shifts is heightened by the phenomenon of dialogic intersection, a concept developed by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin and applied to Lamentations in an article by Charles William Miller. The gist is that, in a polyphonic text, it is not as if one voice were the "objective" description, and the others were simply dramatic personifications, rather, even the seemingly objective narrator is just another *persona* adopted by the author,<sup>9</sup> whose perspective is not infallible. Each voice then may

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<sup>9</sup> Charles William Miller, "Reading Voices: Personification, Dialogism, and the Reader of Lamentations 1," 393. Lanahan makes a similar point (42).

contradict or condition what a previous voice said, such that, when the previous voice speaks again in the dialogue, it cannot remain unmodified, but must respond in some way to the points made by the previous voice. Miller, in typical poststructuralist fashion, uses this phenomenon to suggest an endless deferral of meaning, in which the dialogue never achieves closure in terms of any kind of unity or harmony between the various voices. And, considering that his article focuses solely on Lamentations chapter 1, this makes sense; however, if we are to apply this to the whole five chapters of Lamentation, I think we will see a dialogue of mutually conditioning viewpoints that comes in the end to some kind of unity, though certainly not full resolution, in the corporate prayer to Yahweh. So now let us take some time to observe each of the five poems in succession, to see what purposes the various voices serve in their contexts, and in the process, we will begin to glimpse some hints of a continuous argument by Jeremiah progressing to some kind of resolution.

### *Lamentations 1*

Lamentations 1 is generally regarded as containing two distinct voices, characterized generally as the narrator and the impersonator. First the discourse focuses on the third person, as the prophet simply observes all that has befallen Jerusalem; then it intensifies as he takes up the voice of Jerusalem as that of an abused woman to describe what has happened to her. However, the situation is a bit more complex than this. Rather than dividing neatly in half—1-11 and 12-22—the Prophet begins the second voice in the last line of verse 11. Moreover, the second voice interjects prematurely, in verse 9c. Also, God plays a highly ambiguous role in this chapter. At first, Yahweh is not in focus at all—we do hear in the fifth verse that Jerusalem suffers due to Yahweh, but primarily her oppressors are various enemies among the nations. In 11c-19, Yahweh becomes the oppressor, as Jerusalem herself speaks

up. Jerusalem pinpoints the source of all her trouble as Yahweh alone: “is there any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which Yahweh inflicted on the day of his fierce anger?” However, it is admitted that this punishment is the just reward of Zion’s sin:

“Yahweh is righteous, for I have rebelled against his word” (18). But then at the end (20-22), Yahweh is appealed to as an advocate, to redeem from suffering, and to punish the enemies.

This last perspective may be seen as a kind of mediation of the previous two, because, certainly, if other enemies are persecuting Zion, Yahweh may be called in as a powerful protector, but in appealing to him to stop the problem, it is implied that it must have been in his power to afflict or not all along. In this initial lament, the prophet begins to take note of all the sorrows that have befallen Jerusalem and then adopts Jerusalem’s voice in order to muse aloud at the causes of these sorrows; though Yahweh is partly to blame, Jerusalem still has hope in Him to aid her.

### *Lamentations 2*

The structure of conflicting voices in chapter 2 is more complicated than what we find in chapter 1, and is not as neatly divisible into two distinct voices. As the passion and grief of the book continues to unfold, the organization begins to break down and various thoughts begin to interrupt each other.

Nevertheless, the chapter starts out promisingly, apparently, like chapter 1, from a narrator’s perspective, using entirely 3<sup>rd</sup>-person forms. But instead of “they” persecuting “her” it is “he” persecuting “them”—that is to say, the narrator has now adopted the viewpoint of the end of chapter 1, in which Yahweh is the foe, persecuting the people of Zion. This point is driven home fiercely by a long sequence of parallel clauses: “he has bent his bow...he has killed...he has poured out...” Consistent with chapter 1, then, we might expect

a transition back to the first person perspective around verse 12. Sure enough, in verse 11, the first person appears, but only for three verses, which are really only a transition. Though the narrator speaks in first person, he is still only an observer, looking at the same thing as before, the sufferings of “them”—the people of Zion. By verse 13, he is shifting the focus to “you”—the “virgin daughter of Zion” who is now for the first time being addressed directly. This focus continues, basically, until verse 20, where the “you” remains, but now addressed to God, not Zion. When the daughter of Zion is being addressed, Yahweh continues to be the oppressor, more or less, though this theme is not highlighted as strongly.

On a closer inspection, quite a number of parallels begin to emerge between chapters 1 and 2:

A. 1:1-11: Narrator describes Jerusalem’s suffering (mostly attributed to other foes)

B. 1:12-19: Daughter of Zion speaks, describes her suffering at Yahweh’s hands

B1. (v. 12: passers-by)

B2. (v. 15: The Lord did this to me...three parallel clauses)

B3. (v. 16: weeping and crying, enemy have prevailed)

B4. (v. 17: Zion stretches out her hands)

C. 1:20-22: Yahweh is called upon for relief.

C1. (v. 20: “Look O Lord”)

C2. v. 21: “called” “day”)

A.’ 2:1-10: Narrator describes Jerusalem’s suffering at Yahweh’s hands

(11-13: First-person interlude)

B.' 2:13-19: Prophet speaks to Daughter of Zion, describing her suffering  
(mostly attributed to Yahweh)

B1. (v. 15: passers-by)

B2. (v. 17: The Lord did this...three parallel clauses)

B3. (vs. 18-19: weeping and crying, enemy rejoice over  
her)

B4. (v. 19;: "Lift up your hands")

C.' 2:20-22: Yahweh is called upon for mercy

C1. (v. 20: "Look, O Lord")

C2. (v. 22: "called" "day")

So what can we learn from this, if anything? Well, I think that when we look again at the two chapters, after having once perceived this structure, we are more likely to be struck by the differences than the similarities. That is to say, each of the three themes of discourse changes in tone a good deal from chapter 1 to chapter 2. This fits Bakhtin's idea of dialogic intersection—that after the author shifts into a voice and then comes back out of it, the feelings expressed in that voice will affect the attitudes expressed by later personas. In this case, the impassioned outcry of Zion against Yahweh her persecutor cannot leave the later discourses unaffected. When the narrator picks up again at the beginning of chapter 2, he is no longer a dispassionate observer of Jerusalem's sufferings, but a passionate advocate who speaks up against Yahweh. The narrator seems to break into his own voice in 2:13, and is full of sympathy and concern for Zion. When he speaks to her, it is clear here again that Yahweh is to blame. And when Yahweh is appealed to at the end, there is far less hope in his ability to come to their aid...indeed, the last verse is as ferocious as any indictment against Yahweh:

“You called as if for a festival day my terrors against me round about,  
and there was not in the day of the wrath of YHWH’s nostrils any fugitive or  
survivor;  
those whom I cared for and raised, my enemy finished them off.”

No hope is expressed that Yahweh might redeem them, nor is there any confession of sin.

In the first chapter, there seemed to be three fairly divergent perspectives: Enemies around as the foe, Yahweh as the foe, and Yahweh as the advocate. But as Jerusalem meditated on her sorrows, her bitterness increased. She saw Yahweh as the architect of them and now finds it hard to place any hope in him anymore. In contrast to the variety of chapter 1, by the end of chapter 2, some measure of unanimity has been achieved, and it’s not a happy unanimity.

### *Lamentations 3:*

Lamentations 3 is the most complex and crucial of the five poems that comprise the book of Lamentations. It is the same length as chapters 1 and 2, with 66 lines arranged acrostically, but the acrostic pattern is intensified, as each line begins with the specified letter of the alphabet. Among other things, this boosts rhetorical intensity with a number of anaphoric passages, where two, three, or more lines in succession begin with the same word or phrase. This chapter is the structural crux of the whole book, with most attempts to find a chiasm in the book centering in the vicinity of 3:20-40.

Despite its highly organized acrostic structure, chapter 3, like previous chapters but more so, appears highly disjointed, with lines of thought breaking off suddenly, even in the middle of an acrostic triad, so that a coherent structure for the chapter remains highly elusive.

We see a complicated pattern of voice shifts in this poem. Most simply, it could be organized

3:1-25: “I”—Jeremiah speaks in the first person, whether as himself or as an assumed *persona*, about his sufferings.

3:26-39: “He”—We hear about the justice of Yahweh.

3:40-47: “We”—Jeremiah calls for the people of Israel to repent together in the aftermath of Yahweh’s judgment on them.

3:48-66: “I”—Jeremiah speaks in the first person, whether as himself or as an assumed *persona*, about his sufferings.

So at least there’s an inclusio of some sort. But it’s much more complicated than this, as there are thematic and subject-object shifts within these sections.

3:1-25: “I”—Jeremiah speaks in the first person, whether as himself or as an assumed *persona*, about his sufferings—caused by Yahweh.

1-20: Yahweh (emphasis on “he”) has done this to him

(18-20: Poet looks within himself in grief and finds consolation)

21-25: Yahweh is faithful, and the poet will hope in him (“we” and “you” interspersed in this section along with “he” and “I”

3:26-39: “He”—We hear about the justice of Yahweh.

26-30: A man (the same as the “I” before?) should wait upon the Lord

31-9: Yahweh is faithful and in control of all that is happening.

3:40-47: “We”—Jeremiah calls for the people of Israel to repent together in the aftermath of Yahweh’s judgment on them.

40-42a: Jeremiah calls on people to turn to Yahweh and repent

42b-47: The people raise an embittered cry against Yahweh.

3:48-66: “I”—Jeremiah speaks in the first person, whether as himself or as an assumed *persona*, about his sufferings—caused by other enemies, and he calls on Yahweh to help him and be revenged on those enemies

Another important question in Lamentations 3 involves the identity of the speaker at the beginning and at the end—is it the same person, or not? And if so, who? In my opinion, here we have for the first time something close at least to the voice of Jeremiah himself, who has himself, even while serving Yahweh, suffered greatly, both in terms of Yahweh’s judgment upon Judah, and in terms of the godless people around who persecuted him throughout his long ministry (this suffering too could be attributed to Yahweh, since it was He who had commanded Jeremiah to persevere in a witness He knew would be fruitless). Jeremiah cries out his sorrow as one who has been called to represent a sinful people, and thus to receive both the wrath of Yahweh upon them, and also their wrath against him. The Christ-typology here then becomes vivid, and is heightened by the Psalm 22 parallels we see in the opening and closing sections. Once we see this, we are likely to identify the curious interlude in vv. 26-30 as a description of the righteous suffering man of 1-21 who is Jeremiah and who is Christ. Keil and Delitzsch see the 1<sup>st</sup>-person speaker as the representative of the paradigm of a suffering man, not as the prophet Jeremiah himself. I don’t see why it can’t be both, and I assume that it is in my interpretation of the chapter.<sup>10</sup>

In that case, the chapter can be viewed as a rough repeating parallel structure

1-20: lamentations about suffering at the hand of Yahweh

21-25: the faithfulness of Yahweh affirmed

26-30: description of patient suffering for Yahweh

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<sup>10</sup> Keil and Delitzsch 509.

31-41: faithfulness of Yahweh affirmed

42-47: lamentations about suffering at the hand of Yahweh

48-66: the faithfulness of Yahweh affirmed in the midst of suffering

This way of looking at it has the curious effect of making the final 19 verses of the chapter, which seem so parallel to the first 19, to be in fact their opposite, or answer. Something of this is surely going on; after remembering the faithfulness of Yahweh, the prophet cannot complain anymore in the same terms. This suggests one other way of looking at chapter 3:

A. The prophet speaks; his sufferings prompt a bitter lament against Yahweh (3:1-20)

B. Yahweh's faithfulness affirmed in the face of this bitter lament (3:21-25)

C. Picture of the right response: the man who trusts in Yahweh and accepts his yoke (3:26-30)

B.' Yahweh's faithfulness affirmed again (3:31-39)

(A.' The prophet invites the people of Israel to trust in the faithfulness of Yahweh and mirror the right response to suffering (3:40-42a); this attempt is abortive, as the people instead do the same as the prophet had done at the beginning, and cry out against Yahweh (3:42b-47) )

A." The prophet speaks and laments again, but modeled on a right response to suffering, trusting in the faithfulness of Yahweh.

This last jab is tentative, but is attractive for the central position it gives to the man who "bears the yoke" and for the account it gives of the otherwise enigmatic interjections in vv. 40-47. The idea behind this structure is that, now that the outpouring of God's wrath on

Judah as a whole has been described, the prophet, as he who stands as mediator and representative for the nation before God, speaks up to voice his own complaints. He then remembers, as Judah ought to, God's faithfulness, and a proper response to that faithfulness is described, followed by further description of God's faithfulness. Now, it seems, it is time for Israel, in light of God's great faithfulness just described, to raise their prayer to God in hope and repentance, not in bitter complaint. The rhetorical question is asked, "Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?" The prophet takes his place alongside them, exhorts them in the first person to pray in repentance, but the corporate voice turns back into a complaint. Something has gone wrong, it seems; little has changed from chapter 2. The people of Israel are not accepting what has just been declared about Yahweh's faithfulness. In response to "Yahweh is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him" (25), they charge, "You have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through." The declaration of Yahweh's faithfulness and the picture of the model response to suffering have not been heard. So now the prophet, as representative, decides to speak up again, and model a hopeful response to suffering, raising his complaints before God, but modified in light of a trust in God's faithfulness.

#### *Lamentations 4*

Lamentations chapter 4 is thankfully less dialogically complex than chapter 3, and simpler too than chapters 2 and 3, though not as clearly delineated. Chapter 4 does represent a return to the basic blueprint of chapters 1 and 2, beginning with an extended narrator's perspective on Jerusalem's travails. There are some definite parallels with chapter 2, and there is good evidence of a chiastic relationship between these two chapters (centering, then, on chapter 3, of course). But in tone, the opening of chapter 4 is much closer to chapter 1: it

has none of the harsh indictment against Yahweh that characterizes the opening of chapter 2, but is more of a detached observation. It is pointed out in a couple places, as in chapter 1, that Yahweh was indeed behind the suffering described here, but it is not emphasized. Moreover, there almost seems to be a positive angle on some of the descriptions: “those who once feasted on delicacies perish in the streets; those who were brought up in purple embrace ash heaps,” and so on. This reminds us of prophetic passages where the rich and haughty are told that they will be brought low; the focus on this reversal here suggests a kind of justice in Yahweh’s judgment upon Israel. This notion of justice also seems present in verse 11—“this was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous.” In other words, the prophets and priests deserved what they got, an important contextualizer of verse 16. We should not be surprised at this little spin, given the avowal of Yahweh’s just administration in the middle of chapter 3.

The narration in chapter 4 goes on longer than in 1 or 2, not ending until verse 16. Then the author, instead of going into 1<sup>st</sup> person singular, as we might expect, goes into first person plural, which had showed up for a few lines in chapter 3. The prophet can now speak together with the people, as one of them. This section echoes the close of chapter 3, which focuses on the evils of those human foes who had been afflicting them, and prays to God for deliverance and vengeance. Here, God is not specifically addressed, but the Edomites, Judah’s treacherous brothers, are promised that vengeance will come to them (21-22)

While still undoubtedly a lament, Chapter 4 manages to end on a more positive note than chapters 1 or 2. At the end chapter 1, Yahweh is appealed to take vengeance on Judah’s persecutors, but there is no evidence yet that the prayer will be answered. At the end of chapter 2, Yahweh is implored to show mercy, but, since he has been presented as their chief foe, this appeal might seem somewhat futile. Now, in the wake of chapter 3’s confession of

the Yahweh's faithfulness, chapter 4 can close with a confident declaration that Yahweh will intervene with justice to deliver his people.

### *Lamentations 5*

Here, in chapter 5, we seem to at last have some unanimity. It is the only chapter with no voice changes, as well as being the only chapter with no acrostic structure (remember the point made above about the order/disorder relationship of these two literary phenomena. The chapter begins with a call for Yahweh to look upon the people of Zion in mercy, and ends with a similar call, and there is no reason not to read the verses in between as part of a continuous prayer along this theme. This prayer, significantly, is made by "we," and can be taken as the fulfillment of the exhortation in 3:40-42—"Let us return to Yahweh." At that point, the exhortation is not fulfilled, except a few verses later, by the prophet, speaking only for himself, but now the prophet can call upon the Lord together with the people. There's no sugar-coating in this section, as all of the earlier complaints are taken up again—Israel has lost her inheritance (2), they are pursued without rest (5), they are desperate for food (9), women are raped (11), young and old men have been taken away (13-14), Zion is desolate (18), however, Yahweh is no longer blamed. Neither is he exonerated, though, and neither are other enemies primarily blamed. All of these earlier perspectives seem to be taken up together—Israel has sinned, therefore she is justly punished, various enemies have come upon her, Yahweh has orchestrated this judgment, but justly so. The only solution will be found in turning to Yahweh, and confessing his sovereign faithfulness: "But you, O Yahweh, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations." However, it would be unconvincing and poor style, as well as a rather Stoic worldview, for everything to be resolved so cleanly and simply. There is still tension and dialectic, as the poet continues, "Why do you forget us

forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?” questioning Yahweh’s faithfulness that had been so lauded in chapter 3. The voice then seems to put faith in Him again—“Restore us to yourself, O Yahweh, that we may be restored! Renew our days of old”—before ending, again, on a note of doubt, in a tone that implies Yahweh’s refusal might be understandable, given the magnitude of Zion’s sin—“unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.”

*Summary and Conclusion:*

Have we then uncovered anything useful? Is there any kind of rhyme or reason the poet’s constant shifts in perspective? Lanahan does not think so; for him, the first four chapters are simply going in circles, venting various emotions from a variety of angles with no real answers. Chapter five, then, appears as a kind of resigned addendum—“Well, there’s nothing better to do, so I guess let’s just pray”—not as a capstone. “The inevitable conclusion intended by the alphabetical sequence is inconceivable in the final moment of the book. No new sequence of events or emotions has been initiated. There has been, after all, no real progression in the course of the book: shock, fatigue, despair, disorientation have reached in the fifth chapter a declaration of the communal awareness of Jerusalem’s total destruction. The chorus address its prayer to God to express its need for relief, not to express any firm hope in prompt deliverance. The fund of torments has simply been exhausted; there remains to possible suffering which has not already been inflicted and endured. Now the people have seen the nothingness underlying the life which had separated them from God. They grope their way towards him as towards the only plausible explanation of their human finitude and the only possible source of relief from their anguish.”

But it's simply not so—this analysis ignores the crucial turning points that we have observed in chapter 3. Lamentations does have shape, a beautiful arc of increasing tension, climax, and resolution. It looks something like this.

In chapter 1, the narrative voice observes the pitiable state of Jerusalem, but draws few conclusions. Jerusalem's own voice then speaks as she seeks to make sense of these sufferings, and points her finger at Yahweh as the cause, though she still hopes he will have mercy. The narrative voice hears what Jerusalem has to say and then takes a second look at the situation, concluding, with growing passion and bitterness, that Yahweh indeed has done it. The narrator turns to and fro with growing passion, weeping over the suffering children, describing to Jerusalem her terrible state, and then speaking out to God about the brutality of his judgment. The prophet himself, then begins to speak in chapter 3. He is the representative of the people, and has suffered not only as they have, but from them as well. He too joins in the complaint against Yahweh. But he remembers God's faithfulness with hope, which should make a difference in how he experiences suffering. A description of the proper reaction to suffering, in light of Yahweh's faithfulness, appears, and it looks as if the prophet is going to lead Jerusalem in a choral response of hope and repentance. But Jerusalem is not ready—she is still bitter and hopeless. So the prophet speaks again, and addresses his own troubles in light of Yahweh's faithfulness, providing a model for Jerusalem. Now, in chapter 4, when the narrator speaks again, he is less impassioned, and he begins to see the justice of Yahweh in what has happened. Now the people are ready to speak—they are still lamenting, but they have faith that Yahweh can do something for them and will revenge them. Finally, in chapter 5, they pray to Yahweh, bringing before him again all the laments earlier raised, but admitting their sin again and trusting that he can redeem them, though they conclude with a note of tortured doubt over whether he is still willing to. The

poem is thus a cathartic experience, as the prophet leads Jerusalem into a full expression of her passions and grief, then takes on himself the burden of putting his trust in Yahweh's faithfulness despite the horror of the situation, and then leads them back to some kind of resolution.

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