

The Message of Lamentations¹

ALAN COOPER

Jewish Theological Seminary / Union Theological Seminary

1

Richard E. Palmer's seminal book, *Hermeneutics*, contains a statement that I take to be a first principle for any interpreter of an ancient text: "When interpreting a text from a past age, the interpreter does not empty his mind or leave the present absolutely; he takes it with him and uses it to understand the dialectical encounter of his horizon with that of the literary work."² In the year that Palmer's book appeared (1969), the literary theorist Julia Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality," and with it began to develop an explanation of how such a merger of the horizons of reader and text might take place. Arguing against the New Critical notion of the autonomy of the literary text, Kristeva asserted that every text must presuppose the existence of other texts in order to signify. "Every text," she wrote, "can be construed as a mosaic of citations; every text is an absorption and transformation of another text."³

This notion of "citation" is not to be confused with the historical-critical concern with sources and influences. While it is true that no work can be understood in a void, intertextuality is not primarily a matter of one particular work's relationship to another. In Roland Barthes' formulation:

1. This paper was originally presented at a Judaic Studies Colloquium on "Continuity and Discontinuity in Textual and Intellectual Traditions," Ohio State University, June 5, 1988; a revised and expanded version was presented at an invitational conference on "The Hebrew Bible: Sacred Text and Literature," University of Michigan, November 1, 1988. The paper was supposed to be published in the proceedings of the latter conference, but the volume never materialized. I have decided to publish it at this time for two reasons: first, my views on the topic have not changed; and second, I have seen nothing comparable in the more recent secondary literature. I have updated some of the notes in the body of the paper, but have not altered the argument. I would like to thank those friends and colleagues who provided keen critical responses to earlier versions of this paper, especially Drs. Jeremy Cohen, Tamar Frank, Ed Greenstein, Moshe Greenberg, and David Stern.

2. Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, 1969), 251. For the basis of Palmer's assertion, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1989²), 300–7: "When our historical consciousness transposes itself into historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon" (304). See, in general, Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1984), esp. 41–43 on the present point.

3. Julia Kristeva, *Semiotiké: recherches pour une sémalyse* (Paris, 1969), 146; see also her *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris, 1974), 388–89 = *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, 1984), 59–60.

The intertextual in which every text is held . . . is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the “sources,” the “influences” of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas.⁴

Or, as Jonathan Culler puts it, intertextuality designates a work’s “participation in the discursive space of a culture.” To study intertextuality, then, is to investigate “anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts.”⁵

Consider the following uncontroversial statement about Lamentations 5 by Robert Gordis: “the existence of 22 verses in the chapter, identical with the number of letters in the alphabet, is not accidental; it represents a variant of the acrostic pattern characteristic of chs. 1–4.”⁶ This properly observed affinity of Lamentations 5 with the “acrostic pattern” is clearly a matter of its intertextuality, and not intrinsic to the text itself. A remark by Ed Greenstein clarifies the hermeneutical problem: “Without knowing what an acrostic is, one could not discover the alphabet in the pattern; and without knowing the Hebrew alphabet one could not have found the acrostic pattern in the text.”⁷ And of course, without knowing what an alphabetic acrostic is, it would be impossible to identify a non-alphabetic “variant” such as Lamentations 5.

One further refinement is needed to show how intertextuality fosters the dialectical encounter between reader and text. That is to think in terms of “intertextual

4. Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), 155–64 (quote on 160).

5. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, 1981), 100–18 (quotations on 103). For an intelligent assessment of various ideas about intertextuality (including some criticism of Culler), see Owen Miller, “Intertextual Identity,” in Mario J. Valdés and Owen Miller, eds., *Identity of the Literary Text* (Toronto, 1985), 19–40. Against the profound subjectivity of most theories of intertextuality (“wholly dependent on private and personal associations of a particular reader” [35]), Miller argues, “the choice of intertext must be viewed as an implication rather than a presupposition. In other words, as a result of my intratextual interpretation of the text, I infer from it a *pertinent* intertext, that is one which I select from my repertoire and which seems to address itself to the interpretational problems which I have encountered. My selection is not a personal whim but one imposed to some degree (like an implication) by certain constraints of the text. In this sense my engagement with the text is prior to my selection of an intertext. The choice of an intertext functions as a supplement brought by the reader to facilitate additional meanings of the text, to which the text lends itself” (34–35). The impression that I derive from my own reading experience is that an adequate theory of intertextuality must accommodate *both* presupposition *and* implication. Intertextuality, like its lineal ancestor the hermeneutic circle, “is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 293).

6. “The Conclusion of the Book of Lamentations,” *JBL* 93 (1974), 289–93 (quotation on 291, n. 10). See also David Noel Freedman, “Acrostic Poems in the Hebrew Bible: Alphabetic and Otherwise,” *CBQ* 48 (1986), 408–31, esp. 415–17.

7. For more on theoretical implications of the identification of acrostics, as well as other “assumptions or beliefs” of biblical scholars, see Edward L. Greenstein, “Theory and Argument in Biblical Criticism,” *HAR* 10 (1986), 77–93 (quotation on 79).

reading” alongside the intertextuality of the work itself—in other words, to recognize that every *reader* is what Barthes called “a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost. . . .”⁸ The work’s intertextual identity is, therefore, entirely a product of the reader’s participation in the work. Its meaning can be no greater than the sum of the knowledge that he or she brings to bear upon it (for the most part unconsciously), but also no less. The act of reading, as Ingeborg Hoesterey has written, is

. . . a dynamic act in an intertextual system. In such an act, one departs from a central primary text and its influence on later works and returns, in a loop-like movement, to the primary text, retaining the experience of the influenced work as well as its interpretive environment.⁹

When we assert, as we generally do, that chronology is relevant for interpretation, the mere assertion does not enable us to empty our heads of the rabbinic *Lamentations Rabbati* when we go to read the biblical book of Lamentations. We are caught in Hoesterey’s “intertextual loop.” In other words, we cannot help but retain the influence of the rabbinic commentary when we return to the supposedly “primary” biblical text. Once we know both texts, in fact, to designate one or the other of them as “primary” is to succumb (as the rabbis themselves did not)¹⁰ to the error of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*.¹¹

2

The traditional attribution of the book of Lamentations to Jeremiah provided a ready-made discursive context in which to interpret the book. For practically all commentators prior to the nineteenth century,¹² the Book of Jeremiah served as the “intertext” of Lamentations; the significance of Lamentations could be understood only in the light of Jeremiah. It is no wonder, then, that Lamentations was always read as a confirmation of Jeremiah’s prophecies of doom, together with a confession

8. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller (New York, 1974), 10.

9. Ingeborg Hoesterey, “The Intertextual Loop,” *Poetics Today* 8 (1987), 373–92 (quotation on 374).

10. On this point, see Gerda Elata-Alaster and Rachel Salmon, “Vertical and Horizontal Readings of the Biblical Text: An Application of Jakobson’s Metaphor-Metonymy Model,” *Linguistica Biblica* 60 (1988), 31–59.

11. See Jacob Neusner, *Canon and Connection: Intertextuality in Judaism* (Lanham, Md., 1987). Neusner attempts to account for the simultaneous autonomy and interconnectedness of Jewish texts (esp. 104–5). He argues that the standard assumption that those texts are intrinsically part of one “encompassing system” (namely Judaism) is “a hermeneutic built out of theology and anachronism”—a confusion of social and literary categories. He proposes, instead, “a genuinely secular reading of documents, one by one, in connection with others, as part of a continuous whole, each in its several contexts, immediate and historical, synchronic and diachronic” (all quotes on 148). It is not self-evident that Neusner’s historicist hermeneutic has greater intrinsic merit than the theological one that he imputes to his opponents, but he does offer a valuable alternative.

12. As Wilhelm Rudolph remarks, “Die Verfasserschaft Jeremias blieb mit *einer* Ausnahme (von der Hardt, 1712), bis ins 19. Jahrhundert unbestritten.” For details, see his *Das Buch Ruth-Das Hohe Lied-Die Klagelieder*, KAT XVII, 1–3 (Gütersloh, 1962), 196–99 (quotation on 199). Jeremianic authorship was espoused by all ancient authorities—the versions, the rabbis, and the church fathers. Supporting biblical evidence was derived especially from Jer. 9:9 and 2 Chr. 35:25.

of sin and a call for repentance. No one seemed to notice that Lamentations contains those three elements in very small measure indeed.

The “author” of Lamentations never directly confesses his own sinfulness in first-person singular. He does allude to it a few times during the course of the book (1:8, 18, 20; 3:42; perhaps 4:6;¹³ 5:16), but then only in passing and without elaboration. It is precisely the kind of perfunctory acknowledgement of guilt that pervades ancient Near Eastern penitential literature (a point to which I shall return). Yet the idea that this author (like Jeremiah) viewed the catastrophe of 587 as God’s just punishment for Israel’s sins dominates traditional commentary on Lamentations. According to *Lamentations Rabbati*, even the merit of Abraham was insufficient to save the sinful Israelites, who repudiated the unity of God, the Ten Commandments, and circumcision on the road to destruction and exile.¹⁴

Medieval commentators on Lamentations repeatedly assert that the book is a record of Israel’s sin and punishment which was preserved as a goad to future generations to repent. Like the rabbis, the medievals “saw in Lamentations not a time-bound book describing the unique events of 587 B.C.E., but a timeless book setting forth the eternal paradigm of Jewish suffering.”¹⁵ Thus, for example, the sixteenth-century homilist Moses Alshekh’s explanation of the “theme” of Lamentations 3:

There is a straight path that extends through the entire lament from beginning to end, and it instills us with knowledge of how a person who is weighed down by his torment and suffering ought to conduct himself—he must not be disgusted or cavil at this reproof for his sin, for then the torments will never depart from him. . . . Rather, while in the midst of his affliction, he must recall how he sinned, rebelled, and transgressed against the Lord of All, who created him. . . .¹⁶

Alshekh’s teacher, Joseph Taitazak, one of the leading intellectual figures of Salonica during the first half of the sixteenth century, characterizes the whole book of Lamentations in a similar way in the introduction to his commentary:

It is customary for kings to record their deeds in their chronicles whenever they achieve victories over their enemies, but they wish to leave no trace or memory of their failures. In fact, they put anyone who recalls them to death. Not so the Holy One, Blessed Be He! Alongside the exodus from Egypt, which was a great victory for Israel, He commanded the prophet Jeremiah, peace be upon him, to preserve the memory of that day when Israel stumbled on account of our [sic!] sins, so that they might remember, and return unto the Lord. . . .¹⁷

13. I do not take Lam. 4:6 to be a confession. Rather, the poet is saying that the *punishment* of Israel was more severe than the punishment of Sodom: Sodom was “overthrown in a moment,” while Israel continues to endure terrible suffering. So rightly the footnote in NJPSV. See also, e.g., Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations*, 2nd ed., Anchor Bible (Garden City, 1992), 139. Hillers notes that תָּנַע “could be translated ‘punishment,’” but he opts for “wickedness” anyway.

14. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), 18–39, esp. 26. I am not suggesting that *Lamentations Rabbati* offers a uniform interpretation of Lamentations.

15. Quoting Cohen, “The Destruction,” 19.

16. Moses Alshekh [flourished second half of 16th c.], *Devarim nihhumim*, in *Megillat eikha im . . . peirush ha-Alshekh* (Przemysl, 1893), 39b.

17. Joseph Taitazak [c. 1465–c. 1545], *Lehem setarim* (Venice, 1608) [unpaginated], beginning of commentary on Lamentations; new edition (Jerusalem, 1999), 21. For an appreciation of this neglected scholar, see Meir Benayahu, ed., *Pisqei ha-ga’on MHRV”T* (Jerusalem, 1987), 11–22. On Taitazak’s biblical exegesis, see Shimon Shalem, “Ha-metodah ha-parshanit shel Rabbi Yosef Taitazak ve-ḥugo: mahutah

As another of Taitazak's students, Moses Almosnino, elaborates, the grief that one experiences in recounting the disaster leads inevitably to moral improvement, "for the memory of the evils that befell our people should be the reason for our repentance, and [the thought of] the evil that is coming to us because of our iniquities and sins should be the reason that we remember, and return to the Lord."¹⁸

Throughout their commentaries and homilies, Taitazak and his students take every opportunity to stress Israel's sinfulness, as, for example, in their extraordinary interpretation of Lam. 3:1, *אני הגבר ראה עני בשבט עברתו*, "I am the man who has known affliction by the rod of his wrath." The pronominal suffix on *עברתו* has no antecedent, but practically everyone assumes it to be God. According to Rashi, for example: "'The rod of His wrath' [means] that of his pursuer and smiter, that is, God."¹⁹ Lest anyone think that God is arbitrarily wrathful, the Taitazak "school" asserts that the antecedent is *הגבר*!²⁰ In the words of yet another Taitazak student, Isaac Adarbi:

The verse should be understood as the learned Rabbi, my master and teacher of blessed memory [i.e., Taitazak], interpreted it, taking the antecedent of the pronoun on *עברתו* to be the aforementioned *גבר*.²¹ What it means is that when trouble comes upon a man for no reason, he can comfort himself, for what could he have done about it? But when he himself is the reason for his trouble, he cannot comfort himself. That is why he said "I am the man who has seen affliction on account of the rod of his own wrath,"²² for he himself became the rod of his anger and wrath by following the wickedness of his evil heart. Now as for the continuation, "it drove me into darkness, and not light" [Lam. 3:2]—this indicates, in my humble opinion, that the evil inclination is termed "darkness" because it leads a man to Gehenna, the place of darkness; and the good inclination is termed "light" because it leads a man to light by the light of life.²³

ve-derek ha qahirah," *Sefunot* 11 (1971–77), 113–34; Bracha Sack, "Al peirushav ha-darshaniyim shel R. Yosef Taitazak," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 7 (1988), 341–55.

18. Moses Almosnino [c. 1515–c. 1580], *Yedei Moshe* on Lamentations (Tel-Aviv, 1985), 5.

19. Cf. Abraham Ibn Ezra ad loc.: "The antecedent [of the suffix on *עברתו*] is 'my enemy' [2:22]. Some say that the antecedent is the 'anger' of the Lord [2:21], but that is not correct, in my opinion." Isaac Arama's solution is to personify *עני*, "Affliction," who then conveniently becomes the desired antecedent (*Aqedat Yitshaq* on Lamentations [repr. Israel, 1974], ad loc.).

20. Taitazak, *Lehem setarim*, ad Lam. 3:1 (Jerusalem, 1999), 33. Cf. the earlier attempt by R. Samuel b. Nahman to prove that the verse blames the speaker for "his" own affliction: "The assembly of Israel said, 'since He [i.e., God] saw me bereft of the commandments, bereft of good deeds, he brought the rod of his wrath upon me'" (Salomon Buber, ed., *Lamentations Rabbati* ad 3:1 [repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1967], 124). As Z. W. Einhorn (MHRZ'W) explains in his commentary on the midrash (ad loc.), R. Samuel is responding to the seeming incongruity between *אני*, "I," and *ראה*, "saw" (third-person singular) in the biblical text, and making God the subject of *ראה* instead of the speaker. Thus, in effect, "I am the one whose transgression He has seen [and punished] with the rod of his wrath." Cf. Moses Almosnino's citation and similar explanation of the midrash (*Yedei Moshe*, 84).

21. Cf. Samuel b. Amram's gloss to *Lehem setarim*, ad Lam. 3:1–2 (Jerusalem, 1999), 33–34: "What determines a man's conduct are pleasures and material things, or intellectual things, or a combination of the two. Therefore the prophet says here 'that all my deeds were evil,' in other words, 'I am the man who has seen the poverty of my deeds [i.e., the 'affliction' of the verse] by the rod of his wrath.'" It is the man's own conduct (not God), that leads him into "a darkness in which one cannot expect any light."

22. Perhaps there is a word-play here between *עברתו* "his wrath," and *עברתו*, "his transgression."

23. Isaac Adarbi [c. 1510–c. 1584], *Divrei shalom*, Warsaw ed., Part II, 253 (= Salonica ed., f. 113b; Venice ed., f. 96d). For bibliographical details about this work, see below, n. 25.

The “rod of wrath,” then, is the poet’s own evil inclination. And this “enemy from within,” as Adarbi calls it,²⁴ is responsible for his demise—not God. In Adarbi’s reading, the evil inclination is the subject of the verbs in Lam. 3:2–16, and hence the tormenter of the poet.

Adarbi’s interpretation of Lamentations is not presented in a commentary, but is embedded in a magnificent sermon on the character and purpose of Israel’s suffering.²⁵ He begins with an elaboration of Taitazak’s introduction, concerning God’s penchant for chronicling Israel’s defeats. “The significance of this,” he avers, “is that the power and victories of earthly kings are nothing—mere human actions. . . . But the power and victories of Israel are not mere human actions, but manifestations of God’s will.” When Israel is defeated, it is because “God has handed them over to their enemies because of their iniquities.”²⁶

Now since both victory and defeat for Israel are the products of God’s will: . . . it is fitting that we remember them both, for they are of equal weight, and both will come. It is fitting that they recall times of victory and domination, so that they might acknowledge that God has done all this, that no one but he gives them the strength to do battle. So too they should recall times of defeat and weakness, so that they might acknowledge that their iniquities separate them from their creator. Now this should be a profound reason for complete repentance and self-healing, for iniquity is a disease of the soul, just as fever is a disease of the body. Just as it is impossible for a doctor to heal a bodily disease that he cannot diagnose, since he does not know the cause, so too when a man has no feeling for his own iniquity he cannot cure the disease of his soul through repentance.²⁷

When Adarbi comes to Lamentations, he emphasizes the poet’s use of hyperbole (הגזמה). The point of the exaggerated imagery, he claims, is to affirm that Israel’s demise was not by natural causes:

The lamenter exaggerated [הגזים] the supernatural and otherworldly character of Israel’s suffering and demise and, as I have written, Israel came to recognize the fact that everything had come from God. The people keened and wept far more on this account—because their demise was brought about by God’s hiding of his face—than about their actual suffering and hu-

24. Because the evil inclination is within, it is the most powerful and dangerous enemy of all. See further *Divrei shalom*, Warsaw ed., Part II, 138, 203–4 (= Salonica ed., ff. 69b, 94b–c; Venice ed., ff. 57b, 79d). Cf. also Moses Almosnino, *Yedei Moshe*, 85: “The rod of wrath’ is the evil inclination, that vexing power that is the cause of most sins and iniquities.” He glosses Lam. 3:1, “I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of my wrath, which is the evil inclination.”

25. *Divrei shalom* (Part II; Warsaw: A. N. Rosenberg, 1894), 249–65 (Sermon 28). *Divrei shalom* is the companion to Adarbi’s *Divrei rivot*, his important collection of responsa. It comprises thirty sermons, a commentary on the Torah, and a few miscellaneous homilies on biblical and rabbinic texts. The Warsaw edition was printed twice, in 1893/4 and 1904. From this edition, I have had access only to Part II, which contains twenty-nine of the sermons. I have also consulted the first edition (Salonica, 1580) and the second edition (Venice, 1586), the latter of which is the source of both the third edition (Venice, 1596) and the Warsaw edition. In the older editions, the sermon under discussion is Sermon 29 (Salonica ed., ff. 112a–118a; Venice ed., ff. 95c–101d); the discrepancy arises because of the Warsaw edition’s omission of Sermon 3. When I cite passages from *Divrei shalom*, I give page references to all three editions for the sake of convenience. The primary reference is to Part II of the Warsaw edition.

26. *Divrei shalom*, 249 (= Salonica ed., 112a–b; Venice ed., 95c).

27. *Divrei shalom*, 250 (= Salonica ed., 112b; Venice ed., 95c–d). Adarbi’s full discussion of repentance can be found in Sermons 21–22 (22–23), 186–208 (= Salonica ed., 87d–96a; Venice ed., 73d–81b).

miliation. . . . Since the only reason for the exaggeration [הגזמה] of Israel's demise was to bring about their recognition that everything had come from God so that they might repent, if, therefore, Israel does repent, God will return to them, to gladden them with goodness as at first. Even if they have descended to the lowest depths, there is nothing that can impede the efficacy of repentance.²⁸

Adarbi's sermon includes, among other things, several discourses on Lamentations in relation to other writings. In one, he cites an exquisite midrash that compares the respective sufferings of Israel and Job—which I now quote in full (as does Adarbi):²⁹

The congregation of Israel said to the Holy One, Blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, 'I am the man' [גבר, Lam. 3:1], that is, I am Job, of whom it is said, 'Who is a man [גבר] like Job, who drinks mockery like water?' [Job 34:7]³⁰ What you brought upon Job you want to bring upon me. Concerning Job it is written, 'A Chaldean column of three formations [made a raid]' [Job 1:17]; concerning me it is written, 'The city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans' [Jer. 32:25]. Concerning Job it is written, 'God's fire [אש] fell from heaven' [Job 1:16]; concerning me it is written, 'From above he sent a fire [אש]' [Lam. 1:13]. Concerning Job it is written, 'He took a potsherd [חרש]' [Job 2:8]; concerning me it is written, 'Alas, they are accounted as earthen pots [חרש]' [Lam. 4:2]. Concerning Job it is written, 'They sat [וישבו] with him on the ground' [Job 2:13]; concerning me it is written, '[The elders of fair Zion] sit [ישבו] silently on the ground' [Lam. 2:10].³¹ Concerning Job it is written, 'I sewed sackcloth over my skin, [I lowered my horn to the dust [עפר]]' [Job 16:15]; concerning me it is written, '[The elders of Zion] have strewn dust [עפר] on their heads' [Lam. 2:10]. Concerning Job it is written, 'Pity me, pity me [תנוני] [Job 19:21]; concerning me it is written, 'For I will show you no pity [תניני]' [Jer. 16:13]. Concerning Job it is written, 'For the hand [יד] of God has struck me' [Job 19:21]; concerning me it is written, 'She has received at the hand [יד] of the Lord [double for all her sins]' [Isa. 40:2]."

The midrash seems to be likening Israel to Job,³² but Adarbi claims that "its intention is actually the opposite of its apparent plain sense; its intention is, rather, to exaggerate [להגזים] Israel's suffering in order to show how incomparable it was."³³

28. *Divrei shalom*, 261, 263 (= Salonica ed., 116c, 117b; Venice ed., 99c, 100b).

29. *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 16.6 (ed. Mandelbaum, 1.272–73) = *Yalqut* 2:1035, quoted in *Divrei shalom*, 250–51 (= Salonica ed., 112c; Venice ed., 96a). Buber incorporates the *Yalqut* text into his edition of *Lamentations Rabbati* (123–24), but the standard editions include only the comparison of Lam. 3:1 with Job 34:7.

30. In other words, the basis for the comparison is that Job is called a גבר in Job 34:7; that גבר (Job) is then identified with the גבר in Lam. 3:1 ("the congregation of Israel").

31. This comparison is missing from Buber, but it is in the *Yalqut*, and Adarbi quotes it.

32. Cf. the comparison of Israel with Job by Adarbi's contemporary (and fellow Taitazak student) Eliezer Ashkenazi (1513–1586), in *Ma'asei Adonai* [first ed., Venice, 1583] (Warsaw, 1871), Part 2, 86b (*Ma'asei torah*, ch. 40). Ashkenazi argues that Job symbolizes Israel, and is, furthermore, to be identified with the "servant" of Isa. 52:13–53:12. He defends that identification with a virtuoso display of proof-texting, and concludes: "Isaiah uttered this whole passage concerning Job (who was, as we have said, created to be a symbol for Israel), because what happened to Job [i.e., the restoration of his fortunes] signifies the good that lies in store for Israel. I have explained this portion of Isaiah at length because I am vexed by the wanton way they [i.e., Christians] have sought to interpret it in accordance with their faith." For a detailed discussion of Ashkenazi, see my article, "An Extraordinary Sixteenth-Century Biblical Commentary: Eliezer Ashkenazi on the Song of Moses," in Barry Walfish, ed., *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (Haifa, 1993), 1.129–50.

33. *Divrei shalom*, 251 (= Salonica ed., 112c; Venice ed., 96a).

Adarbi argues, for example, that the Chaldeans who plundered Job's camels (Job 1:17) were just ordinary Chaldeans acting on their own initiative. Not so the Chaldeans who sacked Jerusalem:

The city was given into the hand of the Chaldeans, for they would not have been able to capture it had it not been given to them as a gift, as it is written, "The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or adversary could enter the gates of Jerusalem" (Lam. 4:12).³⁴

The fire from God that engulfed Job's sheep (Job 1:16) was no ordinary fire, but, according to Adarbi, it had not been intended specifically for those hapless sheep. Rather, "first it descended, and then afterwards it just happened to burn up the sheep." Concerning Jerusalem, however, "From above He sent a fire down into my bones" (Lam. 1:13); the sole purpose of this fire was to destroy the city.³⁵

Adarbi does find one important likeness between Job and Israel: both foresaw their hardships before they actually came to pass. "For Job himself says, 'for what I feared has overtaken me; what I dreaded has come upon me' [3:26]." And as for Israel, "Jeremiah warned them time after time."³⁶ But this apparent likeness leads Adarbi to an astounding contrast. Job's affliction and restoration, he suggests, occurred in the natural course of events—and there is more than a hint of astrological determinism in Adarbi's discussion.³⁷ Israel's suffering, on the other hand, was a divinely decreed punishment for sin. The proof is Lam. 3:2, "He led me into darkness, and not light." In the ordinary scheme of things (and, metaphorically speaking, in the case of Job), darkness is always followed by light. For Israel, though, "one darkness leads to another darkness, and one darkness follows another."³⁸ Now

34. Loc. cit.

35. Loc. cit.

36. *Divrei shalom*, 252–53 (= Salonica ed., 113b; Venice ed., 96d).

37. In advancing his argument, Adarbi seems deliberately to be ignoring the first two chapters of Job, which suggest anything but a "natural" course of events. I assume that Adarbi (like the author of Lamentations, as Adarbi depicts him) was not above exaggerating in order to make his homiletical point. See *Divrei shalom*, 253 (= Salonica ed., 113b–c; Venice ed., 96d), on Lam. 3:2–3: "When the reason for the darkness is the configuration of the planets, in every case, because of the progress of time and changing motion [alt.: uniform motion, reading *משתנה* for *משתנה*], light follows of necessity. For if a certain planet is in a certain 'house,' or at a certain degree or a certain aspect, it necessitates darkness and suffering. Movement to the opposite point necessitates the opposite [effect]. Thus light follows darkness, and this was the case with Job, whose suffering came on account of the configuration of the planets. But my [i.e., Israel's] suffering was only because of my transgressions, and thus the Holy One, Blessed be He, decreed it upon me." In a complementary passage in Adarbi's commentary on the Torah, he ascribes even Israel's suffering to the influence of the zodiac and the configuration of planets; but that influence, he affirms, was brought about by a divine decree reversing the benefits that the stars ordinarily would have wrought for Israel. When Israel repents, God will undo the negative influence, "and He will destroy all the heavenly configurations for Israel's sake, as it is written, 'No longer shall you need the sun for light by day, nor the shining of the moon for radiance, for the Lord shall be your eternal light, your God shall be your splendor' [Isa. 60:19]" (*Divrei shalom*, Salonica ed., f. 156b; Venice ed., f. 134d). For the intellectual context in which Adarbi's comments must be understood, see Alexander Altmann, "Astrology," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), 3.791–94; Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1985), 93–112. I would like to thank Professor Bernard Goldstein for helping me to understand Adarbi's technical language.

38. *Divrei shalom*, 253 (= Salonica ed., 113b; Venice ed., 96d). See Adarbi's elaboration of this image in Sermon 19 (20), 171 (= Salonica ed., 82a–b; Venice ed., 68d).

Adarbi himself speaks for Israel in the first person, glossing the crucial verse so as to make his point absolutely explicit:

As long as I persist in my transgression the darkness continually spreads. As [Lam. 3:3] says—"against me *and because of me* [Adarbi's gloss] He brings down His hand again and again without cease." The reason is not in the configuration of the planets; rather, the matter depends upon me.³⁹

Adarbi's Israel asserts, finally, that Job suffered "nothing more than boils, an external disease, but my disease and affliction are in my innermost self. As it says, 'He has worn away my flesh and skin,' *and also* 'he has shattered my bones' [Lam. 3:4]."⁴⁰

There is much more to Adarbi's sermon, which concludes with a powerful plea for Israel "not to despair of redemption." I believe, however, that I have cited enough of it to illustrate its character. It is, in my view, a particularly good example of what traditional exegesis of Lamentations was able to achieve. By assuming the intertextual identity of Lamentations with Jeremiah, as well as the general contiguity of Lamentations with prophetic theodicy, Jewish commentators were able to shape a powerful theodicy for their own communities in duress. The sixteenth-century scholars that I have cited bore witness to terrible events: Taitazak himself was an exile from Spain; Adarbi and Almosnino preached to congregations of refugees;⁴¹ they all endured the plagues and fires that ravaged Salonica during the 1540's.⁴² It is no surprise, then, that the book of Lamentations figures prominently in their writings—writings that belong to the same pathetic tradition as *Lamentations Rabbati*. For as Alan Mintz and David Roskies have shown, the book of Lamentations (in its traditional matrix) has been the intertext for virtually all Jewish literary response to catastrophe.⁴³

3

With the liberation of critical scholarship from allegiance to the traditional intertext, one might have expected a radical reassessment of the religious message of Lamentations. The standard critical position on authorship, put as bluntly as possible by Georg Fohrer, is that "Jeremiah is out of the question as author of the songs."⁴⁴ And, to be sure, new discursive contexts have been proposed for Lamen-

39. *Divrei shalom*, 253 (= Salonica ed., 113c; Venice ed., 96d).

40. *Divrei shalom*, 253 (= Salonica ed., 113c; Venice ed., 96d). Cf. Taitazak, *Lehem setarim*, ad Lam. 3:4 (Jerusalem, 1999), 34; Moses Almosnino, *Yedei Moshe*, 86–87; Alshekh, *Devarim nihhumim*, 40a.

41. On the tensions that arose on account of the mass immigration of Iberian Jews to the Ottoman Empire, see Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1983), 18.55–74. The factionalism within the Jewish community of Salonica was so extreme that "there arose . . . two 'Catalan,' two 'Lisbon,' two 'Sicilian,' and no less than three 'Calabrian' congregations (under different names)" (56).

42. On the great Salonica fire of 1545, see Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*, ed. and trans. Martin Cohen (2nd ed.; Philadelphia, 1977), 211–12.

43. Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York, 1984); David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

44. Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Nashville, 1968), 298. One modern scholar who has defended Jeremianic authorship is H. Wiesmann; see the articles cited by Fohrer on 296.

tations, for example Deuteronomy,⁴⁵ Second Isaiah,⁴⁶ and the lament psalms.⁴⁷ But the centripetal force of the biblical canon seems to have militated against significant reassessment, and when all is said and done, most modern critical readings look more or less like the traditional one.⁴⁸ (This is emphatically *not* to say that modern scholars have been cognizant of traditional commentary.) Wilhelm Rudolph, for example, calls the author “a partisan of the great prophets.”⁴⁹ Norman Gottwald states that “we are compelled to assign [Lamentations] to the main stream of Hebrew prophecy.”⁵⁰ And then there is the argument of Gilbert Brunet, who, in his promisingly titled book, *Les Lamentations contre Jérémie*, claims that the poet was a former opponent of Jeremiah who was forced by circumstances to come around to the prophet’s way of thinking.⁵¹

Brunet’s suggestion, unbeknownst to him, had already been advanced by Yehezkel Kaufmann in an important treatment of Lamentations that is generally ignored.⁵² It was Kaufmann’s discussion of the ideology of Lamentations that led me to a reconsideration of the book’s intertextual identity—in particular, his assertion that “the book of Lamentations is not a prophetic work, but a work of popular religion.”⁵³ While I would agree with this general statement in principle, it is not a simple matter to define “popular,” as opposed to “prophetic,” faith. Kaufmann cites several elements of what he terms “archaic religion,”⁵⁴ in some ways anticipat-

45. See, e.g., Bertil Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Lund, 1963), 231–37. Albrektson also brings the “so-called Psalms of Zion” (46, 48, 76) into the discussion, 219–30 (quotation on 220).

46. See, e.g., Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (Evanston, Ill., 1954), 43–46.

47. See, e.g., Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta, 1981), 179–80; elaborated in Westermann’s *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis, 1994).

48. See the insightful remarks of Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1979), 596: “The effect of the canonical process on the book of Lamentations was not one of dehistoricizing the fully time-conditioned response of the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem. Rather, the response was brought into relationship with a dimension of faith which provided a religious context from which to seek meaning in suffering.” It should be perfectly clear that the “dimension of faith” and the “religious context” are both *extrinsic* to the book.

49. *Das Buch Ruth-Das Hohe Lied-Die Klagelieder* (above, n. 12), 196: “Der Inhalt von Threrweist den Verfasser als Gesinnungsgenossen der grossen Propheten. . . .”

50. Gottwald, *Studies*, 107. See also the comparable claims by Artur Weiser, in Helmer Ringgren and Artur Weiser, *Das Hohe Lied-Klagelieder-Das Buch Esther*, ATD 16/2 (Göttingen, 1958), 45–46; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, BKAT 20 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1968³), 15–16; Hans Jochen Boecker, *Klagelieder* (Zürich, 1985), 16; Renate Brandscheidt, *Gotteszorn und Menschenleid: Die Gerichtsklage des leidenden Gerechten in Klgl 3* (Trier, 1983), 346. The essential point is that the author of Lamentations sees the destruction of Jerusalem as the fulfillment of prophetic threats of divine judgment (“die Erfüllung der von den Propheten vermittelten Gerichtsdrohung Jahwes,” in Brandscheidt’s words). Everyone cites 2:17 as proof of this assertion (sometimes also 2:8). That verse, in my view, has nothing to do with prophecy—especially in the light of 2:14—but expresses the kind of fatalism that also turns up in Job 10:13. Rashi’s comparison of Lam. 2:17 with Job 6:9 is also to the point.

51. Gilbert Brunet, *Les Lamentations contre Jérémie* (Paris, 1968), esp. 85–87.

52. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot ha-emunah ha-yisre’elit* (Jerusalem, 1966 [orig. 1948]), 3.584–99.

53. *Ibid.*, 594: צִירַת הָאֱמוּנָה הָעִמְמִית.

54. *Ibid.*, 595: הָאֱמוּנָה הָעִתִּיקָה.

ing the better-known work of Albrektson. He notes the poet's evident belief in the holiness and inviolability of Zion. Unlike Jeremiah, the poet had never believed that the destruction of the city was possible. And even after the destruction, the author's continuing respect for old cultic institutions contrasts vividly with the prophetic condemnation of the idolatrous cult.

When it comes to characterizing the penitential attitude of Lamentations, however, Kaufmann reverts to the traditional approach:

Even though [the poet] had not believed previously that God would cast down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth, it was clear to him now, after the destruction had come, that the destruction was the wrath of the just God against the sin of the people. These laments are justifications of the sentence. "The Lord is in the right, for I have disobeyed him" (1:18) [one of the few verses of this type that I mentioned above—AC].⁵⁵

That the poet had witnessed and experienced the wrath of God is beyond question. Still, the idea that he subsequently "fell in" with the prophetic theodicy, and interpreted his suffering as *just* punishment for his sins is, for me, anything but obvious.

For there is another kind of "popular religion" endemic to the ancient Near East. It knows nothing of biblical covenant and prophecy, yet finds its literary expression in masterpieces of penitential prayer—in works that have more in common with Lamentations than does anything in the Bible. And this form of popular religion, in my view, might serve as fertile ground for the intertextual reading of Lamentations.

The eminent student of ancient Near Eastern religion, Thorkild Jacobsen, defines what he calls "personal religion" as follows:

a . . . religious attitude in which the religious individual sees himself as standing in a close personal relationship to the divine, expecting help and guidance in his personal life and personal affairs, expecting divine anger and punishment if he sins, but also profoundly trusting to divine compassion, forgiveness, and love for him if he sincerely repents.⁵⁶

Jacobsen cites examples of this religious attitude from all over the ancient Near East, although he claims that it first emerged in Mesopotamia near the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. Three elements are regularly found in literary expressions of the attitude: requests for guidance; expectation of divine anger or punishment; and trust in divine compassion.⁵⁷ The following excerpt from one of the Egyptian votive steles from Deir el-Medina clearly embodies all three elements of personal religion:

I am a man who swore falsely by Ptah, Lord of Maat,
And he made me see darkness by day.
I will declare his might to the fool and the wise,
To the small and great:

55. *Ibid.*, 595–96.

56. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, 1976), 147.

57. *Ibid.*, 147–55.

Beware of Ptah, Lord of Might!
 Behold, he does not overlook anyone's deed!
 Refrain from uttering Ptah's name falsely,
 Lo, he who utters it falsely, lo he falls!
 He caused me to be as the dogs of the street,
 I being in his hand;
 He made gods and men observe me,
 I being as a man who has sinned against his Lord.
 Righteous was Ptah, Lord of Maat, toward me,
 When he taught a lesson to me!
 Be merciful to me, look on me in mercy!⁵⁸

Another well-known expression of "personal religion" is the Hittite "Prayer of Kantuzilis":

Would that my god might now freely open his heart and soul to me and tell me my fault so that I might learn about it! . . . My god who was angry and rejected me—let the same god care for me again and grant me life! Would that my god who forsook me might take pity on me! . . . See! I, Kantuzilis, thy servant have asked for mercy and humbled myself.⁵⁹

The most profuse literary manifestations of personal religion are the several genres of Mesopotamian laments.⁶⁰ It is more than forty years since Samuel Noah Kramer called attention to the Sumerian lamentations that mourn the destruction of cities,⁶¹ but it remained for W. C. Gwaltney, working under the supervision of William W. Hallo, to demonstrate the formal contiguity of Lamentations with first-millennium Mesopotamian lament literature, particularly those elegies known as *eršemmas*.⁶² Yet even Gwaltney, for all his thoroughness and insight, failed to perceive the *religious* (as opposed to literary) contiguity of the two literatures—to wit, that they are parallel expressions of the same religious idea. Thus he concludes, "Because of the polytheistic theology underlying the Mesopotamian laments and

58. Cited from Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley, 1976), 2.110.

59. Cited in the translation of Albrecht Goetze, in *ANET*³, 400.

60. An excellent introduction to the Mesopotamian liturgical genres is Marie-Joseph Seux, *Hymnes et prières aux dieux de Babylonie et d'Assyrie* (Paris, 1976), 13–32. This book also contains a fine collection of Mesopotamian penitential prayers in French translation (with bibliography), 139–211.

61. For the Sumerian texts, see Raphael Kutscher, *Oh Angry Sea (a-ab-ba hu-luh-ha): The History of a Sumerian Congregational Lament*, YNER 6 (New Haven, 1975); Piotr Michalowski, *The Lamentation Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1989); Mark E. Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 2 vols. (Potomac, Md., 1988). For discussion of the alleged biblical parallels (with bibliography), see Thomas F. McDaniel, "The Alleged Sumerian Influence Upon Lamentations," *VT* 18 (1968), 198–209; more recently, see Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, *SBLDS* 127 (Atlanta, 1992); F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, *BibOr* 44 (Rome, 1993); Walter C. Bouzard, Jr., *We Have Heard With Our Ears, O God: Sources of the Communal Laments in the Psalms*, *SBLDS* 159 (Atlanta, 1997); Michael Emmendorfer, *Der ferne Gott: Eine Untersuchung der alttestamentlichen Volksklaglieder vor dem Hintergrund der mesopotamischen Literatur* (Tübingen, 1998).

62. W. C. Gwaltney, Jr., "The Biblical Book of Lamentations in the Context of Near Eastern Lament Literature," in William W. Hallo et al., eds., *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1983), 191–211. For a comprehensive discussion of the *eršemmas*, see Mark E. Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemmas*, *HUCA Supp.* 2 (Cincinnati, 1981). This book was not available to Gwaltney at the time of his writing.

their ritual observance, they could not be taken over without thorough modification in theology and language.”⁶³ And wherein lies this “thorough modification”? In the justification of God and the acknowledgement of guilt.⁶⁴ The traditional intertext rises again!

Still, Gwaltney has recognized that Lamentations incorporates the rhetorical strategies of the Mesopotamian laments lock, stock, and barrel: the plea to an unanswering god; the personification of and apostrophe to the destroyed city; the invective against the enemy; the detailed description of the carnage; the kaleidoscopic changes of person. As for the purpose of these laments, it is simply to quench the burning anger of the gods, as is clear from two of the major genre designations: er-ša-hun-ga,” Lament for Calming the Heart”;⁶⁵ and in-im-inim-ma dingir-ša-dib-ba gur-ru-da-kam, “Incantation for Appeasing an Angry God.”

Concerning the latter, as W. G. Lambert remarks, “The point of these prayers in every case is derived from the misfortune or suffering of the speaker.”⁶⁶ The penitent demonstrates what Jacobsen calls the “paradoxical character of personal religion, with its conspicuous humility curiously based on an almost limitless presumption of self-importance, its drawing the greatest cosmic powers into the little personal world of the individual.”⁶⁷ The god’s anger, which is the self-evident cause of the suffering, is variously explained. The following example is reminiscent of Lam. 5:7:

Drive out from my body illness from known and unknown iniquity,
The iniquity of my father, my grandfather, my mother, [my] grandmother,
The iniquity of my elder brother and elder sister,
The iniquity of clan, kith and kin,
Which has come upon me because of the raging of the wrath of my god and goddess.⁶⁸

The penitent who does not evade culpability typically confesses in the most general terms, sometimes offering excuses (as in Lam. 2:14 and 4:13), more often denying any awareness of having sinned, but acknowledging that everyone does. One penitent affirms that “the iniquities . . . of mankind are more numerous than the hairs of his head. I have trodden on my iniquities, . . . which were heaped up like leaves. On this day let them be released and absolved.”⁶⁹

I see this last type of penitence in the few confessional statements in Lamentations. Of course the speaker acknowledges guilt, and recognizes that s/he is suffering on account of divine wrath. But those are merely the existential facts of the situation—part of its “background,” as it were. The confessions are neither derived from nor integrated into a “prophetic” theological scheme of sin, punishment, repentance, and forgiveness. Not only are they vague and perfunctory, but in each case the

63. “The Biblical Book of Lamentations,” 211.

64. *Ibid.*, 208–9.

65. On this lament genre, see Stefan M. Maul, *Die Herzberuhigungsklagen: Die sumerisch-akkadischen Eršahunga-Gebete* (Wiesbaden, 1988).

66. W. G. Lambert, “Dingir.ša.dib.ba Incantations,” *JNES* 33 (1974), 267–322 (quotation on 270).

67. *Treasures of Darkness*, 161.

68. Lambert, “Dingir.ša.dib.ba Incantations,” 280–81, lines 114–18.

69. *Ibid.*, 284–85, lines 6–8.

poet dodges personal accountability. In chapter one, “he” assumes the persona of fallen Jerusalem, and it is “her” confession; in 3:42 and 5:16, he diffuses the general admission of guilt with first-person plural.

These confessions are, in any case, subsidiary to the principal purpose of Lamentations, which is identical to that of the Mesopotamian laments: to bring the god’s wrath (so vividly depicted in Lam. 2:1–8) to an end by calling his attention to the penitent’s wretched state.⁷⁰ Neither confession nor repentance will do the trick, because the *extent* of both the god’s love and his anger appears to be arbitrary, as irrational as the love and anger of a parent must seem to a child. As Jacobsen observes, in relation to the gods humans are nothing but children who can never grow up.⁷¹ (Note the obsessive use of the endearing epithets בַּת and בֶּן, “daughter” and “son,” throughout Lamentations.)⁷² The standard conclusion of the *eršahunga* is instructive in this regard: “May your heart, like the heart of a real mother, be quieted towards me; like a real mother and a real father may it be quieted towards me.”⁷³

Just as Israel’s suffering seems in no way commensurate with its sin, so too restoration cannot be achieved through mere confession, but by divine favor alone. The lament is a bald plea for help, and not in any sense a *quid pro quo*. This latter point turns up, perhaps surprisingly, in Moses Almosnino’s commentary on Lam. 5:21: יהוה ונשובה, “Return us, Oh Lord, unto yourself, and we will return”:

Even if it is the case that He has abandoned us for a long time, until we return on our own, and He has not forgotten us forever, it is not right that He wait for us to return on our own. Rather, He must open the gates of repentance for us, so that we might return to Him.⁷⁴

The same idea is expressed in the aquatic metaphor of one of the *din gir-šà-dib-ba* incantations:

My god, you have carried off my wife, you have carried off my son.
My god, receive my hands uplifted in sighing.
Like river water I do not know where I am going,
Like a boat I do not know at which quay I put in.
I have fallen, raise me up. I have slipped, take my hand.

70. So, rightly, Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the After-life of a Biblical Book* (Chicago, 2000), 55: “This sort of appeal to the destroyer to become the one to heal is a conventional element in ancient Near Eastern laments.”

71. *Treasures of Darkness*, 161–62.

72. On the form and meaning of these epithets as terms of endearment, see W. F. Stinespring, “No Daughter of Zion: A Study of the Appositional Genitive in Hebrew Grammar,” *Encounter* 26 (1965), 133–41. An alternative interpretation has been proposed by F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “The Syntagma of *bat* Followed by a Geographical Name in the Hebrew Bible: A Reconsideration of its Meaning,” *CBQ* 57 (1995), 451–70.

73. See Seux, *Hymnes et prières*, 18.

74. *Yedei Moshe*, 195. Contrast Samuel b. Amram’s gloss to *Lehem setarim*, ad Lam. 3:38–40 (Jerusalem, 1999), 37: “It is known to everyone that if a man does not begin to repent, even if he were to sit for a hundred years, God would not restore his fortunes. Rather, he must make a start, and then God will aid him.” This is certainly the way the sequence והשיבני ואשובה, “Bring me back, let me return,” must be understood in Jer. 31:17–18. But given its radically different context, Lam. 5:21 may represent an ironic reversal of the sequence. Note also Alshekh’s attempt to accommodate *both* interpretations, *Devarim nihhumim*, 56b.

In still waters be my oar.
 In deep waters be my steering paddle.
 Do not hand me over to an evil day.
 Do not turn me over to a day of storm.
 The food I found I ate with sighing.
 The water I found I drank with sighing.
 Like one who goes down in the marshes, I have fallen in the mud.
 Look with favor, look with steadfast favor on me.
 Like a marsh, you have filled me with weeping: comfort me.
 . . . Look with favor, look with steadfast favor on me.
 For me may the heart of my god become as it was (in other words, *הֲרֵשׁ יְמִינוּ כַקֶּדֶם*—“Renew our days as of old” [Lam. 5:21]).⁷⁵

4

I have been intimating that there is no longer any intrinsic reason to read the book of Lamentations in the light of the biblical canon, or to fit it into the frame of some “biblical theology.” Despite the undeniable heuristic power of those intertexts, I find it equally plausible and illuminating to place Lamentations in a different discursive context—the popular lament literature of the ancient Near East, and the widespread “personal religion” that it manifests.⁷⁶ Now I am *not* doing this because I think that the comparative method is superior to other methods. I would like to suggest, rather, that there are many valid, though irreconcilable, ways of reading the same text.

I have tried to show how two different intertextual readings of Lamentations produce two opposing interpretations. Both readings assume that divine wrath brought about the destruction of Jerusalem. And both assume that, in principle, God rewards righteousness and punishes iniquity. One reading justifies God in all his ways, and places the full burden of Jerusalem’s demise on the shoulders of the people. Their only hope is repentance. The other reading, in contrast, finds the extent of God’s anger incomprehensible. The only hope, then, is that the wretchedness of God’s miserable people will evoke God’s equally mysterious love.⁷⁷

Both readings, I would argue, offer valid interpretations of the Book of Lamentations. Perhaps more significantly, in my view, they represent legitimate alternative expressions of Israelite faith. Such alternative possibilities of meaning, I think, are what give the text its unabated power to succor many different kinds of readers—believers and non-believers alike.

The task of the scholar, as I understand it, is not to search for a novel interpretation, and then to proclaim it as the previously unrecognized “real meaning” of the text. The goal of scholarship ought to be, rather, to sustain multiple interpretations,

75. Lambert, “*Dingir.šà.dib.ba Incantations*,” 278–81, lines 88–108.

76. As Jacobsen observes (*Treasures of Darkness*, 164), “As far as we can see, it is only Israel that decisively extended the attitude of personal religion from the personal to the national realm.”

77. Cf. Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 35–61. See also Paul Joyce’s discussion of the “equivocal nature of the hope” that is discernible in Lamentations, in an interesting attempt to apply bereavement theory to the analysis of the poems, “Lamentations and the Grief Process,” *Bib. Int.* 1 (1993), 304–20 (quotation on 313).

indeed, to defend the merit of *all* serious possibilities of meaning.⁷⁸ That is why I have no intention of arguing, or trying to “prove,” that the comparative approach brings about an “advance” over other interpretations. Instead, I will conclude with a brief re-reading of Lamentations 3—the poem whose central verses are the cornerstone of the traditional reading of the book—as a document of “personal religion.”⁷⁹ I paint this reading with broad strokes, and do not eschew a bit of the exaggeration that Adarbi uses so effectively. I propose it as a *possible* interpretation, with the intention of adding a new dimension to the appreciation of Lamentations as a literary and religious document.

The discussion by Mintz is typical, although far more sensitive than most. He states that in chapter 3 the sufferer finally grasps “a necessary relationship between the ordeal thrust upon him and his own actions.”⁸⁰ I do not think that the penitent would ever have denied that relationship (although he may not have understood just how it applied in his case), nor do I see it as the significant issue. The question is not philosophical (“What is the meaning of my suffering?”), but practical (“How do I get out of here?”). In his desperate quest for a solution to his *practical* problem, the poet will try anything—even turn the other cheek (3:30), or profess an absurd faith in divine goodness that is utterly at odds with his own experience (3:31–36).⁸¹ The mood is not one of hopeful reflection, but of desperation. And the possibilities turn out to be illusions; after that bit of soul-searching, the situation is no less desperate than it was before. “Let us examine our ways and return to the Lord,” suggests the poet in 3:40, but it has no apparent effect: God refuses to forgive (3:42), murders pitilessly, and blocks out prayer (3:42–46). In chapter 4, God represents nothing to the poet except wrath and destruction (especially 4:11). By 5:21, as Almosnino intimates, the author is ready to declare that if God wants “us” to return, *He* will have to take the initiative. And he is willing to consider the possibility that God has simply abandoned Israel forever (5:20, 22). The vacillation between hope and despair in 5:19–22, incidentally, perfectly epitomizes the equivocality of the whole Book of Lamentations.⁸²

78. I have elsewhere characterized a “serious” reading of a text as one that assumes its meaningfulness, interprets it in strict accordance with its language, and strives to “explicate” it maximally. “New” interpretations, then, do not displace old ones, but enhance the “appreciation” of the text by adding to the repository of ideas that is the history of interpretation. See “On Reading the Bible Critically and Otherwise,” in Richard E. Friedman & H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *The Future of Biblical Studies: The Hebrew Scriptures* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 61–79, esp. 72.

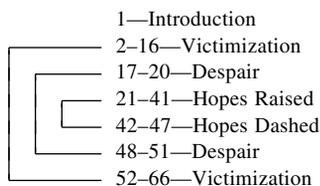
79. The most comprehensive treatment of Lamentations 3 known to me is Brandscheidt, *Gotteszorn und Menschenleid* (above, n. 50; with extensive bibliography).

80. Mintz, *Hurban*, 37. The chapter in this book about Lamentations (17–48) is essentially the same as a previous study by Mintz, “The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe,” *Prooftexts 2* (1982), 1–17 (quotation on 12). For a similar interpretation, see Jože Krašovec, “The Source of Hope in the Book of Lamentations,” *VT 42* (1992), 223–33.

81. Cf. the supposedly incongruous words ascribed to Job in Job 24:18–20, 22–25; 27:8–23. As Dermot Cox observes (*The Triumph of Impotence: Job and the Tradition of the Absurd* [Rome, 1978], 100): “what Job seeks is some way to impose a system of values or norms that *he* understands on the world he lives in, so that his own selfhood and relevance will be affirmed. Yet all the while he is doing this, he knows that no such system exists.” In like manner, the author of Lamentations 3 appeals to a system of belief that his own experience seems to confute.

82. Cf. Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 59–61.

The symmetrical arrangement of Lamentations 3 serves, in my view, to negate any hope that might be derived from its central section. The structural divisions (by verse numbers) are indicated on the following diagram:⁸³



The shift from first to third person in the introductory verse dissociates the poet from the “persona” of the poem;⁸⁴ the formulation creates an ironic distance between poet and speaker. The many subsequent changes of person, and the parodistic allusions to liturgical genres, serve to increase the sense of confusion.

Following the introduction, the next fifteen verses (2–16) detail the speaker’s victimization by God. The dominant theme is, as Hillers suggests, an ironic reversal of the twenty-third psalm: “the Lord is a shepherd who misleads, a ruler who oppresses

83. I discerned the symmetry of Lamentations 3 independently of Brandscheidt, and was pleased to discover that she had preceded me in recognizing it, noting the same structural divisions (*Gotteszorn und Menschenleid*, 48). Our interpretations are divergent in other respects. The concentric structures of Lamentations 1 and 2 were first recognized by Albert Condamin, “Symmetrical Repetitions in *Lamentations* Chapters I and II,” *JTS* 7 (1905/6), 137–40. The exegetical ramifications of those structural arrangements have yet to be explored in detail. The structure of Lamentations 4 is also concentric, in my view, hinging on the transition from divine wrath to the treachery of earthly kings at the center of the poem (vv. 11–12). Vv. 3–10, which describe famine and suffering, are balanced by vv. 13–20, which detail the depredation of Israel by its enemies. The theme of the poem is expressed at the peripheries: the reversal of Israel’s fortunes (gold turned into dross, vv. 1–2) will be undone, and the victorious enemy will become the victim (vv. 21–22). The opening two verses pose a riddle: “How do precious things become things that are thrown away [תשתפכנה, v. 1]?” The answer is held in abeyance until the beginning of the second half of the poem (vv. 13–14): “When they shed [שפכים] the blood of the righteous.” The precious things of vv. 1–2 are, of course, the prophets and priests of vv. 13–14. On the concentric structures of Lamentations 3 and 4, see also Johan Renkema, “The Literary Structure of Lamentations (II),” in Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. De Moor, eds., *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, *JSOT* Supp. 74 (Sheffield, 1988), 321–46; also J. Renkema’s commentary, *Lamentations*, *HCOT* (Leuven, 1998), *passim*. For a more general study of poetic features of Lamentations, see Daniel Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Biblical Poetry*, *SBLMS* 39 (Atlanta, 1989), 83–104.

84. On the various personae adopted by the poet during the course of Lamentations, see William F. Lanahan, “The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations,” *JBL* 93 (1974), 41–49; Barbara Bakke Kaiser, “Poet as ‘Female Impersonator’: The Image of Daughter Zion as Speaker in Biblical Poems of Suffering,” *JR* 67 (1987), 164–82; Knut M. Heim, “The Personification of Jerusalem and the Drama of Her Bereavement in Lamentations,” in Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham, eds., *Zion: City of Our God* (Grand Rapids, 1999), 129–69. The multiple personae, in my view, preclude the simplistic (and fallacious) isolation of a single authorial point of view. Scholars continue, nonetheless, to assume that one exists so that they can articulate the book’s “theology.” The identity of the “I” in Lamentations 3 has preoccupied exegetes for millennia. See the survey of opinions in Hillers, *Lamentations*, 121–23. Hillers himself identifies the speaker as “Everyman” (122). Cf. Boecker, *Klagelieder*, 73: “Was er erlebt hat, kann und soll zum Paradigma für andere werden.” This is certainly the way the poem has been appropriated by biblical theology, but I am not convinced that it has anything to do with the poem itself. Incidentally, my favorite proof that the speaker is Jeremiah is the proof by gematria—the numerical equivalence of אֵי הַגִּבּוֹר (Lam. 3:1) with רִמְיָהוּ. See Eliezer of Worms (attr.), *Peirush ha-Roqeah al ha-megillot* (Bnei Braq, 1985), 37.

and imprisons.”⁸⁵ These verses are matched by the last fifteen verses of the poem (52–66), which include a parody of a thanksgiving psalm (52–61), a description of the speaker’s victimization by his enemies, and a plea for revenge. The key-word link is שׁוּב: “God has turned against me [כִּי יִשׁוּב]” (3:3) is transformed into “Take vengeance against them [תִּשְׁׁיֵב לָהֶם גְּמוּלָה]” (3:64). The cry for revenge is not contingent upon the poet’s self-examination; it is simply a call for the redirection of God’s wrath.⁸⁶ The verbs in the perfect in verses 55–61 are incantatory in thrust—not precatives,⁸⁷ but emphatic assertions: “You *must* have heard my voice; you *must* have seen the wrong done to me.” They are the speaker’s last-ditch attempt to elicit a divine response, but none is forthcoming.⁸⁸

In verses 17–20, the speaker expresses his despair. The corresponding portion of the second half of the poem is in verses 48–51, which describe his weeping for Zion. Verses 1–20 and 48–66, then, drastically qualify any hope that is expressed at the center of the chapter. In verses 21–47, I see hopes raised (21–41) and then dashed (42–47)—anything but a profound theological insight.⁸⁹ Of course, I was not expecting one: my “author” is no theologian, just a wretched and confused human being, trying to cope honestly with an impossible situation. He believed what ordinary folks everywhere in the ancient Near East believed—that his god loved him and would take care of him—and now he feared the worst: that he was wrong.

5

In an article entitled “Form and Message in Lamentations,” Bo Johnson makes an extraordinary statement about the “theological message” of Lamentations. “It could be argued,” he writes, “that there is no such message at all. . . .”⁹⁰ He immediately rejects that heretical idea, perhaps thinking that there would be nothing to write about if it were true. But I think that he was right, at least in the sense that Lamentations has no *univocal* theological message. It is in its very essence a book that speaks with many voices, and conveys many messages—disquieting and even subversive ones alongside those that seem to confirm the most conventional sort of piety. Ultimately, of course, the “message” of Lamentations abides where it always has: in the minds and hearts of its devoted readers.

85. Hillers, *Lamentations*, 124.

86. There is no indication that the proposed repentance in verse 40 (even though it includes the key-word שׁוּב) might actually effectuate the redirection of God’s wrath. As Adarbi observes, the purpose of this divine revenge is not to redress the wrongs done to the poet, but to avenge the profanation of God’s name (*Divrei shalom*, 279 [= Salonica ed., 123b; Venice ed., 105d]).

87. So, e.g., Hillers, *Lamentations*, 118.

88. It makes no sense to me to argue for multiple speakers *within* Lamentations 3 (so Kraus, *Klagelieder*, 54–59, followed by Hillers, *Lamentations*, 123). Nor am I able to see vv. 52–61 as an *actual* “song of thanksgiving” (so Weiser, *Klagelieder*, 87; Boecker, *Klagelieder*, 70–71) that serves as a paradigmatic demonstration of the efficacy of vv. 34–36 (so Kraus, 68). This speaker has nothing to give thanks for; his “song of thanksgiving” is ironic and parodistic.

89. Cf. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Tragedy, Tradition and Theology in the Book of Lamentations,” *JSOT* 74 (1997), 29–60. Dobbs-Allsopp observes that the hopes that are raised in Lamentations 3 are “engulfed by the tragic” (55), by the “oppressive” silence of God (*ibid.*). The continuing articulation of pain and grief, in Dobbs-Allsopp’s view, validates the dignity of the sufferer, who questions God’s justice even as he seeks to evoke divine compassion (59).

90. Bo Johnson, “Form and Message in Lamentations,” *ZAW* 97 (1985), 58–73 (quotation on 59).

Today we are going to see the message the book of Lamentations has for us. "The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. The oracles they gave you were false and misleading." (Lam. 2:14). Far too often, we don't want to hear anything that makes us feel uncomfortable. We don't understand that the messages they give us are often false and misleading. Those preachers who preach on the power of positive attitudes and positive thinking are great motivational speakers. They can certainly help us in many areas of life. But they aren't truly preachers. Preachers are those who teach us God's will and God's ways. Are these "peace and prosperity" messages Biblically accurate? The Message of Lamentations. More Information. Publication Date: 15 May 2015. Series: The Bible Speaks Today Old Testament. Publisher: IVP. Page Count: 176. Author: Christopher J H Wright. ISBN-13: 9781783592753, 9781783596201. The Message of Lamentations. Honest To God. By Christopher J H Wright. In stock. ISBN-13. 9781783592753-grouped. Grouped product items. The central message of Lamentations for the church today around the world is that of God's sustaining grace in the midst of suffering. One thinks of global poverty and mismanagement of wealth, various kinds of assault on the dignity of the human individual, and conflict at the level of the family all the way up to international conflict.