

names of the Russian princes in the monastery of St Sabbas—Michael Sviatopolk, Prince Boris, Prince Gleb, and Prince David . . . and all the names of the princes and boyars of Russia I left at the Holy Sepulchre. I said fifty masses for the living, and forty for the dead, in the holy places. All will be blessed who read this, for blessed it is to believe without having seen'. He reminds us how Abraham's faith was blessed with the gift of this very promised land that Daniel now shares with his readers. To believe, he comments, is itself a good work. 'Peace be with you forever'.

## The Book of Lamentations<sup>1</sup>

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The Lamentations of Jeremiah is a book with which the old *Tenebrae* Office for Holy Week gave many people at least a nodding acquaintance. Not infrequently, however, the much admired musical settings tended to detract from the attention given to the words themselves, a fact noticed by Mendelssohn, who remarked that the most powerful music was usually expended on the mere rubrics, the *alephs beths* and *incipits*. That Lamentations does repay, both for theological and for literary content, a careful study, will I hope emerge from this article. But before we speak of content, we should say a word or two about the structure and authorship of the book.

The book consists of five poems, corresponding to its five chapters, of which the first four are abecedarian in structure (which is to say that each stanza begins with a fresh letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each line of the stanza begins with the same letter as the first line), and are written in the usual Hebrew metre for laments and elegies, known as *Qinah*: the characteristics of this metrical form are that the first half of each line contains three 'significant words' or 'substantial ideas', and the second half-line contains only two. The 'limping' effect of this

<sup>1</sup>This article is not intended as an original contribution to the study of the book of Lamentations. I am concerned merely to collate and synthesize the discoveries and opinions of reputable scholars about a book which deserves to be known much better than it now is.

metre may perhaps be felt even in translation from the following example:

'Weeping she-wept in-the-night : her-tears on-her-cheeks.  
 Never a-comforter had-she : among-all her-lovers  
 All-her-friends deceived her : became her-foes'.

(Lam. I. 2)

(It is desirable to read Lamentations in a version in which a fresh line is used for each line of the Hebrew verse, to retain some flavour of the stark beauty of the original. To me, Knox loses the atmosphere altogether). The last chapter (the *Oratio Jeremiae Prophetae*) is neither abecedarian nor is it written in the *Qinah* metre, but it does (for whatever reason) consist of twenty-two verses, the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The modern reader will be astonished to find the artificiality of the abecedarian structure so successfully wedded to immense sincerity and spontaneity. As sometimes in Racine, it is as if the emotion achieves its greatest effect precisely as it is felt to be straining to break asunder the restraint of a rigid structure: herein perhaps lies the strength of the 'classical' as against the 'romantic' tradition.

Is the book really by Jeremiah? The most obvious reason for attributing the book to the prophet is the statement in 2 Chron. 35, 25 that after King Josiah died Jeremiah and others uttered dirges over him, and that these dirges were written in the book of the Laments: the phrase in Lam. 4. 20, 'the breath of our nostrils, Yahweh's anointed, was captured . . .' is supposed to refer to Josiah (as the Targum says) and is taken as part of the 'dirges' referred to in Chronicles, so Lamentations is therefore concluded to be the same book as the Laments. But in fact the reference in Lam. 4 cannot be to Josiah, who died twenty years before Jerusalem fell. Stronger ground for the Jeremian authorship may be found in Lam. 3, which has a clear reference to the sufferings of an individual (cf. 3. 1. 'I am the man . . .'), and that this individual is Jeremiah is evident especially from the verses

"They flung me alive into the pit  
 and threw stones upon me;  
 Water closed over my head;  
 I said, I am cut off!" (3. 52-54)

This seems to be a definite allusion to Jeremiah's fate in the pit (Jer. 38. 6 seq.), although the Jeremiah passage actually says: "There was no water in the cistern, only mire". But though this part of Lamentations is written in the person of Jeremiah, it remains very doubtful whether the book was actually written by Jeremiah: in Lam. 4. 17, 20 we find

regret expressed at the failure of confidence in Egypt and the Jewish king—but Jeremiah had certainly never reposed any hope in either of these; further, in the Hebrew Bible (unlike the Septuagint and Vulgate), Lamentations does not follow Jeremiah.

The abecedarian structure, which Knox stiltedly imitates in his translation, is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, but nowhere, except in Psalm 119, as extensively as here. What motives can lie behind its use? Gottwald<sup>2</sup> has enumerated the various suggestions that have been put forward. The most decisive reason for the use of the technique is probably the desire for completeness of expression. The Babylonians regarded the alphabet as representing the full cosmic cycle, and we know that the Jews spoke of fulfilling, or breaking, 'the whole law from Aleph to Tau', that is 'completely'. Our author, wishing to express his grief over the desolation of Jerusalem 'from A to Z', as we might say, did precisely and literally that; not that he invented the abecedarian device (there is an instance of it in an inscription of Assurbanipal, decades before Lamentations), but it was he who first used it on any considerable scale among the Jews.

Lamentations was composed not long after the most traumatic experience of Israel's history. In 586 B.C., the Chaldean army had captured Jerusalem, had razed the temple to the ground and had carried off into exile in Babylonia all save the poorest and least-educated of Jerusalem's inhabitants. Lamentations unfolds the emotions, alternating between near-despair, mystification and trust in Yahweh, excited in eye-witnesses of that fearful event, and reveals them with a vividness that makes for literature of the very first order. Theologically, not the least interesting (and easily the most important) aspect of the book lies in its attitude to suffering. I shall consider at some length Jewish answers to the problem of suffering, and the specific answers provided by this book.

The oldest Jewish view of suffering is neatly illustrated by the words of the psalmist:

'I have been young, and now am old;  
yet I have not seen the righteous man forsaken,  
nor his children begging bread . . .

The righteous shall be preserved for ever  
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off'.

(Ps. 37)

<sup>2</sup>*Studies in the Book of Lamentations* by Norman K. Gottwald, S.C.M. Press, London, 1954. This excellent book includes a new translation of Lamentations, which is marred only by the unlovely verb 'to envision'.

According to this view, prosperity is the reward of virtue, oppression of sin; this unsubtle equation won adherence without any refinement for several centuries. But as the Jews became more settled in the agricultural life, and as 'capitalists' began to multiply, experience began to show that as it stood the doctrine was often proved false. Ecclesiastes ('all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour' 4. 4) knew the falsity of the doctrine, and the book of Job was written specifically to give the lie to it. Job itself has two explanations of suffering to offer: the prose story of Job (chapters 1, 2 and 42) explains Job's sufferings as a test of his worth imposed by 'The Satan' (who is here perhaps less a devil than a devil's advocate in the trial of Job's worthiness). The explanation offered by the verse story of Job (3-42, 6) is that God's purposes are too mysterious for us to begin to understand the reason for suffering; this much can be learned, from God's effects, that if God does not here and now vindicate the righteous it is not for want of power or of wisdom.

Ecclesiasticus (c. 180 B.C.) teaches the purifying value of suffering: 'Accept whatever comes to you, patient in disease and affliction; gold is tried in the fire and acceptable men in the furnace of affliction' (Ecclus. 2. 4-5): he also says: 'It is easy for Yahweh at the end to requite a man according to his deeds' (11. 26), by which he probably means 'a wicked man may . . . enjoy prosperity all his life, but so terrible may God cause his last hours to be that all his former enjoyment of life becomes wholly obliterated'<sup>3</sup>. The Book of Wisdom combines the idea of testing with that of the vindication of the just beyond the grave: 'The souls of the righteous are in God's hand: no torment shall touch them. To the foolish they seemed to die, and their departure was taken as their hurt, their going forth as ruin. But they are in peace . . . their brief chastenings over, they will now receive great reward, for God tried them and found them worthy of himself. As gold in the furnace he tried them' (Wisdom 3. 1-6).

The texts quoted show the growth of a reluctance in any particular case to offer an explanation of sufferings; we may compare the dictum of a later Rabbi (Jannai): 'It is not in our power to explain either the prosperity of the wicked or the chastenings of the righteous' (Aboth 4. 19). The old doctrine that sin brings suffering, and virtue prosperity, requires the addition of a rider: the allocation of reward may in fact take place only after death. Thus the growing concern with the after-

<sup>3</sup>Box and Oesterley in Charles' *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of O.T.*, Oxford 1913, p. 310. Others think Ecclesiasticus is referring to punishment after death.

life made possible a refinement of the doctrine which fitted the facts of experience.

But we must note that in its application to nations, as distinct from individuals, the doctrine was retained to the end in its original form, and therefore (to return to our subject) Lamentations, which is concerned only with the suffering of a nation, retains the pristine form of the teaching. We are left in no doubt that Jerusalem's fall was due solely to national sin:

'They stagger blindly in the streets  
defiled with blood;

None can touch  
their clothes.

"Away! Unclean!" men shout at them;

"Away! Touch not!"

Surely they have become fugitives and wanderers:

among the nations they shall dwell no more'. (4. 14-15)

Here there is an oblique comparison with Cain, who also became a 'fugitive and wanderer' (Gen. 4. 12):

'The iniquity of the daughter of my people was greater  
than Sodom's sin,

Which was overthrown on a sudden  
no hands alighting on her' (4. 6)

The long drawn-out agony of Jerusalem's capture, as contrasted with the painless destruction of Sodom, is taken to show that Jerusalem was more wicked even than Sodom, that very archetype of guilt. Seldom in the Old Testament is God's people painted so black.

Sure as he is that Jerusalem's sufferings are fully deserved, our author's attitude towards them advances an important step beyond the old notion of suffering, for like Ecclesiasticus later he sees that suffering, patiently borne, can itself be the source of merit:

'Good is Yahweh to those who wait for him: to the soul that seeks  
him.

Good it is to wait quietly: for Yahweh's saving power.

Good it is that a man bear: the yoke from his youth.

Let him sit alone in silence: when he takes it on him;

Let him put his mouth in the dust: perhaps yet there is hope;

Let him give his cheek to the smiter: and be filled with insults.

For the Lord will not cast off for ever'. (3. 25-31)

Under the figure of the yoke, Lamentations is saying much the same thing as Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus will say under the figure of the

furnace. The exciting thing is that so constructive an attitude to suffering should be found at so early a date: for Lamentations predates Ecclesiasticus by nearly three centuries, and was not written in comparatively peaceful times but in the very trough of Israel's most violent disaster. We should notice, however, that these are not in fact the most prevalent sentiments of Lamentations, and the very same poem (i.e. chap. 3) includes quite a measure of acrimonious feeling against Jerusalem's enemies.

Lamentations believes suffering to be good for the soul, but also has a lively hope that the term of the sufferings will soon be reached, a hope which rests upon a deep sense of the justice of God:

'Yahweh will not  
cast off for ever.  
Though he inflict pain  
he will have pity in abundance of mercy;  
For not with pleasure does he oppress  
and afflict men'. (3. 31).

'To crush under foot  
all prisoners of earth,  
To turn aside a man's right  
before the Highest,  
To subvert a man in his cause  
—Yahweh does not approve'. (3. 34-6)

But despite this vigorous confidence in Yahweh's justice, and despite the surprisingly advanced attitude to suffering that we have noted, the prevailing mood of Lamentations is one of deep heart-rending sorrow over Jerusalem's ruin, expressed with a rare poignancy to which even the psalm *Super Flumina* scarcely aspires:

'Is it nothing to you all, you who pass by?  
Consider and see  
If there be any sorrow like to my sorrow  
which was dealt me,  
Which Yahweh inflicted  
in the day of his fierce wrath'. (1. 12)

'Happier the victims of the sword  
than famine's victims;  
For they pine away, debarred  
from produce of the fields;

Even compassionate women  
 Boiled their children;  
 They became their food  
 at the destruction of the daughter of my people.' (4.  
 9 and 10)

Surely no better part of scripture could be chosen to express the desolation of Holy Week than this exquisite composition. It is fascinating, in fact, to discover that the connection of Lamentations with Holy Week may actually be much closer than has ever been suspected, for Gottwald (op. cit.) has shown good reason to suppose that the second part of Isaiah, with which Lamentations has not a few similarities, may in fact have been written *after* Lamentations, and not before as is usually supposed: thus the passages about the Suffering Servant, in which Christ is prefigured, may be modelled on the description of Jeremiah's afflictions in the third chapter of Lamentations.

Since early times Lamentations has been read by Jews on the Fast of the Ninth of Ab, when the destruction of the Temple is commemorated. Schaff, in his *Through Bible Lands*<sup>4</sup> has a moving reference to the Jewish use of Lamentations. He is speaking about the 'Wailing Place of the Jews at Jerusalem': 'There the Jews assemble every Friday afternoon and on festivals to bewail the downfall of the holy city. I saw on Good Friday a large number, old and young, male and female, venerable rabbis with patriarchal beards and young men kissing the stone wall and watering it with their tears. They repeat from their well-worn Hebrew Bibles and Prayer-Books the Lamentations of Jeremiah and suitable Psalms . . . the key note of all these laments and prayers was struck . . . in the Lamentations, that funeral dirge of Jerusalem and the theocracy. This elegy, written with sighs and tears, has done its work most effectually in great public calamities, and is doing it every year on the ninth of the month Ab (July), when it is read with loud weeping in all the synagogues of the Jews and especially at Jerusalem. It keeps alive the memory of their deepest humiliation and guilt and the hope of final deliverance. The scene of the Wailing Place was to me touching and pregnant with meaning'.

<sup>4</sup>pp. 250-252. Quoted in A. W. Streane's edition of *Jeremiah and Lamentations* in the Cambridge Bible series, p. 360.