The Poetry of Suffering in Lamentations: A Literary Analysis[1]

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Abstract

The Book of Lamentations is significant in Jewish culture, extending far beyond its religious dimensions, because it reflects the recurring disasters and tragic events that have shaped the Jewish national experience throughout history. In this article, the author offers an in-depth literary and theological analysis of the Book of Lamentations, emphasizing its significance within Jewish culture and religious tradition. The book is investigated not merely as an expression of grief over the traumatic destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in the 6th century BCE, but also as a structured poetic work that delivers educational, didactic, and moral messages. The article is divided into three main parts. The first part provides a general and concise introduction assisting the reader in understanding various aspects of the book, including its historical background, the origin of its title, the tradition of its composition, and its placement within the canon of the Hebrew Bible. The second and core part of the article dissects the book's structure, literary genre, and the thematic organization of its five chapters. It highlights the unique linguistic features of Lamentations and their impact on Hebrew language and literature, both ancient and modern. The final section addresses the theological paradox of faith in a just God amidst suffering and injustice, a central motif in the Book of Lamentations. The author examines the pathways of rabbinic literature to

1 This article was written for the conference "Narratives of Suffering in the Psalter" organized by the Biblical Institute in Zagreb, held on January 25, 2025, in Zagreb.

gain insight into Judaism's perspective on the question of suffering and affliction in the world. This analysis includes excerpts of rabbinic texts, bridging classical Jewish thought with contemporary discussions. The article integrates literary and theological insights, offering a nuanced understanding of Lamentations as a cultural, historical, and religious artifact.

Keywords: *destruction, Hebrew, Jerusalem, Lamentations, literary analysis, Talmud*

Introduction

The Book of Lamentations holds a significant place in Jewish culture, extending far beyond its religious context, as the harsh historical reality has embedded calamities and difficult events as part of the collective national experience of the Jewish people throughout the generations. In Judaism, it is customary to read the Book of Lamentations on the eve of Tisha B'Av[2] after the evening prayer, with the congregation seated on the floor in mourning.[3] In some traditions, this reading is done in darkness, with the elegies chanted in a minor melody. Since approximately the seventh century, the custom emerged to incorporate special laments into the evening and morning prayers of Tisha B'Av. These laments focus on the destruction of the Temple and the suffering that preceded and followed it. They also commemorate tragic events such as the execution of the "Ten Martyrs"[4] and the persecutions during the various Crusades. In the Book of Lamentations, the *daughter of Zion* laments the painful departure of God and questions how and why it occurred, what she should do, and how she is expected to cope with God's absence and the traumatic, dramatic event of the destruction.

This article aims to examine, through a literary analysis of the five chapters of the Book of Lamentations, the profound theological paradox in which people insist on believing in a moral God while simultaneously experiencing suffering, evil, and injustice emanating from that very same God. We will explore the purpose of the book, arguing that its author aimed for more than merely giving

2 Tisha B'Av – the Ninth of Av is a fast day, observed in mourning for various calamities that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history, with an emphasis on the destruction of the First and Second Temples, which, according to tradition, occurred on this date. See Dadon 2009, 232-234.

3 This practice first mentioned in sources from the Gaonic period: *Tractate Soferim* 1937, Chapter 14, Halacha 3.

4 The ten martyrs (heb. *Asara Haruge Malkhut*) – are the ten leading rabbis who were cruelly executed by the Roman government in Israel because they did not obey the orders of the Roman government but continued to study and teach the Torah. These ten rabbis became part of the Jewish consciousness of opposing the Roman orders aimed at the destruction of Judaism. See: *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Baba Batra 10b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Sotah 48b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Berachot 61b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Sanhedrin 14a.

voice to suffering. The goal was to convey an educational message to the reader, achieved through the creation of a unique literary structure. Our study will also address unique Hebrew words originating in the Book of Lamentations, the Croatian translation of certain terms, literary motifs, and various linguistic phenomena that the biblical poet interweaves into the biblical poetry of Lamentations. These motifs not only influenced the ancient Hebrew language of the sages but also continue to survive into modern times, forming an integral part of contemporary Hebrew.

Before delving into the literary analysis of the text and discussing the philosophical implications of suffering, we will begin with a brief general introduction. This preface will help contextualize various aspects of the book, including its background, title, the tradition of its composition, and its place within the Hebrew Bible. In our analysis, we adopt a holistic approach grounded in Jewish tradition regarding the composition and canonical status of the Book of Lamentations. The methodology employed in this work combines interpretations from classical and modern rabbinic literature with an analysis of the literary motifs present in the Book of Lamentations.

1. General Introduction to the Book of Lamentations

The background to the tragic events described in the Book of Lamentations can primarily be found in the Book of Kings (2 Kgs 24-25) and Jeremiah (especially Ch. 39-44). The Kingdom of Babylon succeeded the Assyrian Empire, and the destruction and exile of Judah resulted from repeated rebellions by the kings of Judah against Babylon. In 604 BCE, during the reign of Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar subjugated the Kingdom of Judah (2 Kgs 24:1). Three years later, Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, prompting a severe Babylonian response (2 Kgs 24:1-2). This campaign culminated in the Babylonians laying siege to Jerusalem, exiling Jehoiachin, seizing the Temple's treasures, and deporting the elite of Judah (2 Kgs 24:4-17). After Jehoiachin's exile, the King of Babylon appointed Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, as king of Judah, changing his name to Zedekiah (2 Kgs 24:17). Zedekiah also rebelled against the King of Babylon, leading Nebuchadnezzar to march against Jerusalem with his army and lay siege to the city on the 10th of Tevet, 587 BCE. The heavy siege lasted for two years, during which the inhabitants of Jerusalem suffered from famine and plagues. On the ninth of Tammuz, the walls of Jerusalem were breached. Approximately a month later, on the seventh of Av, the Babylonians set fire to the Temple, the royal palace, and the entire city, deporting the remaining population to Babylon. King Zedekiah was taken to Babylon, where he witnessed the execution of his sons before his eyes were blinded (2 Kgs 25:8; Jer 52:12). The destruction of the Temple represents a national trauma, marking the end of Judah's religious and political independence. The laments in

the Book of Lamentations vividly describe the profound suffering endured by the people during the siege and their intense emotional responses to the catastrophic events of the destruction.

In modern Hebrew, the title of the book is Eicha, derived from its opening word, "Eicha yashva badad" ("Alas! Lonely sits the city").[5] Since as is known, the books of the Jewish Bible, the Tanakh, in Hebrew carry names derived from the initial words or phrases at the beginning of the text (Genesis – Bereishit, i.e., "Bereishit Bara;" Exodus – Shemot, i.e., "VeEle Shemot;" Leviticus – Vayikra, i.e., "Vayikra Hashem el Moshe;" Song of Songs – Shir HaShirim, i.e., "Shir HaShirim asher liShlomo," etc.), or they are named after the central biblical figure in the book, such as Joshua, Jeremiah, Ezra, or Esther. There are books whose titles reflect the nature of leadership, for example, Judges or Kings. Additionally, some books are named after their literary genre, such as Chronicles or Psalms. However, the name "Megillat Eicha" (The Scroll of Eicha) or simply "Eicha" appears in Jewish sources only from the Middle Ages onward (*Tractate Soferim* 1937, Chapter 14, Halacha 1). In the Talmud and rabbinic literature, the book is referred to as "Megillat Kinot" (The Scroll of Laments)[6] or "Sefer Kinot" (The Book of Laments).[7] It is also sometimes abbreviated simply as "Kinot."[8] In contrast, in both ancient and modern translations of the Bible, as is common with other biblical books, the title of the Book of Lamentations is naturally tied to its content and genre rather than its opening word. Thus, the prevalent name for the book since antiquity has been Kinot (Laments).

Regarding the authorship and dating of the book, this issue remains subject to debate. The Book of Lamentations itself does not explicitly mention its author. In the Talmud, Jewish tradition attributes the book to the prophet Jeremiah.[9] This

5 Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, published by JPS. Most translations into English were taken from *Sefaria.org*. All emphasis added by the author unless differently specified.

6 *Jerusalem Talmud* 1523, Shabbat, Chapter 16, Halacha 1, 79a; *Midrash Lekach Tov - Pesikta Zutreta* 1880, Chapter 31, 143b.

7 *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Chagigah 5b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Moed Katan 26a; *Tractate Soferim* 1937, Chapter 18, Halacha 5.

8 *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Baba Batra 14b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Berachot 57b; Maimonides 1974, Hilchot Beit HaBechirah 5:2; see also *Tractate Soferim* 1937, Chapter 18, Halacha 5.

9 *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Baba Batra 15a; *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Yoma 38b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Gittin 58a. The Talmud also connects Lamentations to the "scroll" burned by King Jehoiakim (605 BCE), as described in Jeremiah 36. According to the Talmud: "'And every time Jehudi read three or four columns, (the king) would cut it up with a scribe's knife and throw it into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed by the fire in the brazier....' (Jeremiah 36:23). What is meant by 'three or four columns'? They told Jehoiakim: Jeremiah has written a scroll of lamentations. He asked them, 'What is written in it?' ... They replied: 'the LORD has afflicted her For her many transgressions. (Lamentations 1:5)' Immediately, he scratched out all mentions of God and burned them in fire" (*Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Moed Katan 26a; see

tradition was widely accepted by Jewish commentators and thinkers in the Middle Ages, including Maimonides (Maimonides 1974, Hilchot Teshuva 5:3). However, modern biblical scholarship largely disputes the identification of Jeremiah as the author of Lamentations. Most scholars argue that the linguistic style, thematic focus, and structure suggest it was composed by a different author or group of authors, possibly at a later time (Klein 1999, Vol. *Megillot*, 116). In the opening of the Septuagint, it is written that Jeremiah composed this lamentation over Jerusalem: "And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive, and Jerusalem made desolate, (that) Jeremias sat weeping, and lamented (with) this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said…"

In this regard, all Christian traditions have followed the same line. It seems that the attribution of the Book of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah stems from the desire of the rabbis to present a human and attributed face to the text, similar to how the Psalms are attributed to King David, and the books of Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes are attributed to King Solomon. Additionally, the fact that Jeremiah is known as the prophet of destruction, active during that period, contributes to this attribution. Another factor contributing to the identification of Jeremiah as the author is the many linguistic similarities between the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations.[10] In ancient translations, such as the Septuagint and the Syriac Peshitta,[11] the Book of Lamentations is placed within the section of the Major Prophets, alongside the Book of Jeremiah. This is likely because early traditions attributed the composition of the scroll to Jeremiah. In contrast, in the Jewish tradition, in the Talmud (*Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Baba Batra 14b) and in various manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible according to the Masoretic tradition,[12] the Book of Lamentations appears among the Five Megillot (scrolls) in the Writings (Ketuvim) part of the Hebrew Bible rather than among the Books of the Prophets. This is despite the fact that the Talmud asserts that Jeremiah is the author of the Book of Lamentations and that it was written by him during the period of the First Temple's destruction. The Five Megillot were read publicly during Jewish festivals, with their internal order likely following the

also *Midrash Eicha Rabbah* 1878, 3:1 and *Midrash Lekach Tov - Pesikta Zutreta* 1880, introduction).

10 For example, compare: Lamentations 1:1; 3:28 with Jeremiah 15:17; Lamentations 2:13 with Jeremiah 14:17; Lamentations 2:22 with Jeremiah 52:17; Lamentations 3:47 with Jeremiah 48:43; Lamentations 3:48 with Jeremiah 8:21-23; and Lamentations 5:21 with Jeremiah 31:18.

11 Peshitta – is the standard version of the Bible used in the Syriac Christian tradition. It is written in the Syriac Aramaic, a language and dialect, dates back to the early centuries of Christianity.

12 The Mesora refers to the body of work by Jewish scholars, who meticulously preserved the textual integrity of the Hebrew Bible from approximately the 6th to 10th centuries CE. Their work ensured the transmission of an accurate biblical text, complete with vowel notations (*nikud*), cantillation marks (*te'amim*), and annotations to maintain consistency in copying manuscripts. See: Dadon 2009, 483.

chronological sequence of their recitation during the Jewish holidays throughout the year. The Book of Lamentations (read on Tisha B'Av) appears after the books Song of Songs (read on Passover, in the month of Nisan) and Ruth (read on Shavuot, in the month of Sivan), and before the books Ecclesiastes (read on Sukkot, in the month of Tishrei) and Esther (read on Purim, in the month of Adar).

2. Literary Analysis of the Book of Lamentations

2.1. Literary Genre and Structure of the Book of Lamentations

In the ancient Near East, laments were written both to mourn a destruction that had already occurred and to prevent future destruction. There are laments from various cities in ancient Mesopotamia, and similarities can be found between these laments and the Book of Lamentations. The points of similarity are striking, suggesting a form of cultural or literary connection, despite the long gap of over a thousand years between the Sumerian laments and the Book of Lamentations, as well as the theological differences that underpin these laments.[13]

The lament is a poetic expression of mourning, categorized as a biblical genre. In the Bible, we find both individual laments and communal laments. An individual lament includes David's lament for Saul and his son Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-27), or for Abner ben Ner (2 Sam 3:33-34), or for Absalom (2 Sam 19:1). Community laments are directed towards the people of Israel (Am 5:1-2; Isa 22:1-3), or other nations (for Egypt: Ezek 32:16). The laments in the Book of Lamentations fall into this category of communal laments. The literary characteristics typical of biblical laments include praise for the deceased or the destroyed city (2 Sam 1:22-24; Ezek 19:10-11; Lam 2:15), a contrasting or opposing comparison of the good past with the horrific present (Lam 1:1,7; 4:5, etc.), and the emphasis on the enemy's rejoicing at the downfall (2 Sam 1:20; Isa 14:7-8; Lam 1:7-21; 2:16-17).

The traumatic event of the city's and temple's destruction, the death of many of its inhabitants, and the exile resonate in various ways in several psalms, particularly Psalms 74, 79, and 137.[14] Psalm 74 was written in response to the devastating impression left by the desecration of the temple, accompanied by other calamities— the destruction of the city and the death of its inhabitants: "O God, heathens have entered Your domain, defiled Your holy temple, and turned Jerusalem into ruins. They have left Your servants' corpses as food for the fowl of heaven,

13 For further study of the exceptional similarities and differences between the Sumerian laments and the biblical Book of Lamentations, see: Samet 2012, 95-110.

14 For a detailed analysis of these points, see: Zakovitch and Shinan 2017, 15.

and the flesh of Your faithful for the wild beasts. Their blood was shed like water around Jerusalem, with none to bury them" (Ps 79:1-3).[15]

Poetry in the Bible is characterized by three main features: parallelism, meter, and rhythm. Poetic lines typically consist of two parts that maintain a specific relationship: repetition, completion, or explanation. The poetry in the Book of Lamentations is rich in imagery and metaphors, featuring an eloquent vocabulary, allusions, repetition, contrast, and other characteristics of biblical poetry, all of which suggest high-quality literary artistry. One of the prominent literary tools in Lamentations is the use of personification and the shifting voices between chapters, which lends the laments a dramatic quality. The figure of the *daughter of Zion* represents the people of the city of Jerusalem, in contrast with the general lamenters. *The man* represents the individual people and their suffering. The voice of *wisdom* and the voices of the *community* are also heard in chapter three. The greatness of the author lies in the creation of these different speakers, who are, in fact, distinct literary figures that together form a complete and complex work—the Book of Lamentations (Assis 2020, 8-9).

The Book of Lamentations is divided into five chapters, each representing an independent lamentation about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the tragic fate of its inhabitants, and the exile of Judah. The laments reflect the profound theological shock and national crisis the people experienced following the destruction, alongside a religious crisis marked by immense grief and sorrow. This crisis significantly altered the course of Jewish history. The five chapters bear a strong resemblance to the division of the Torah into five books, and similarly to how the Book of Psalms is divided into five books.

The first, second, and fourth chapters share similarities in their style and structure. They all begin with the lamentation word *eicha*, and each contains 22 verses.[16] Chapters 2 and 4 are similar in both content and form. Both chapters describe the destruction of the city and the severe famine with similar language and style. In these chapters, the expressions "שֶׁבֶר בַּת עַמִּי" ("the breaking of my people's daughter") and "רֹאשׁ בְּכָל חוּצוֹת" ("the head of every street") appear, highlighting the shared theme of devastation, suffering, and chaos experienced during the siege. Chapters 1 and 5, on the other hand, portray the aftermath of the destruction with unique motifs and a shared vocabulary. These chapters highlight the sense of shame and loss of dignity among the exiles (see Lam 1:6 and 5:12). However, there are significant differences between them. Chapter 1 is characterized by a pessimistic atmo-

15 According to *Tractate Soferim* 1937, Chapter 18, Halacha 4, the following Psalms 74, 79, 137, are to be recited on Tisha B'Av.

16 It is worth noting that there are psalms in the Bible that are not written in an acrostic form but still contain 22 verses, corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, such as Psalms 33, 38, and 103.

sphere of despair, while chapter 5 contains a glimmer of hope for a better future. Chapter 1 does not contain a prayer for salvation from God, while chapter 5 opens and closes with a prayer. The turning point between despair and its consequences, as presented in the first two chapters, and the hope in the last two chapters, is found in chapter 3. This chapter marks the shift from despair to hope, culminating in the direct plea to God in chapter 5. This progression reflects the movement from profound suffering and hopelessness towards the possibility of redemption and divine intervention. The third lament differs from the other laments in two main ways. Firstly, in terms of structure, it is written alphabetically, like the other laments, but it contains three times as many verses – 66 verses as opposed to the usual 22. Each letter of the alphabet is represented three times, creating a more complex yet orderly structure. Secondly, in terms of content, this lament does not mention the destruction of Jerusalem or Judah. Instead, it is a personal lament, with the speaker identifying as "the man," expressing the individual's suffering and the severe punishment he believes has been inflicted upon him by divine will. Unlike the other laments that focus on collective suffering, this one is a deeply personal expression of grief. The fifth lament, in contrast, although consisting of 22 verses like the other alphabetic laments, is not arranged alphabetically. It concludes the Book of Lamentations with a public plea and prayer. This lament reflects both sorrow and absence, but also an urgent plea to God to return to his people and lift the punishment he has imposed upon them.

To conclude this part, we will focus on the unique literary feature present in the first four chapters of the Book of Lamentations, namely the alphabetical acrostic[17] arrangement and its significance in this context.[18] The Sages proposed several reasons for the use of the alphabetical structure in Lamentations. One reason given is that it serves as a mnemonic device: "Why is the Book of Lamentations written in the alphabet? So that it may be memorized by the mourners" (*Midrash Eicha Rabbah* 1899, 43). Another reason mentioned in the Midrash explains that the use of the alphabetical acrostic is an expression of completeness: "I wanted to bless them from Aleph to Tav... but they sinned and were punished from Aleph to Tav" (*Midrash Eicha Rabbah* 1899, 43).[19] "Why is the Book of Lamentations written in alphabetical order? Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Nehemiah, and the Rabbis (Sages) differ. Rabbi Yehuda says that the people transgressed from Aleph to Tav; there-

17 Acrostic – (from Greek: άκρο meaning "extreme" + στίχος meaning "line;" in Latin: *Acrostichis*) is a literary technique used in poetry or prose, where the first letter of each word, line, or stanza spells out a word, phrase, name, or follows a specific sequence such as the alphabet.

18 Other acrostic psalms in the Hebrew Bible can be found in Psalm 119 (a collection of eight verses for each letter), Psalm 145 or the "Eshet Chayil" ("Woman of Valor") poem at the end of the Book of Proverbs (31:10-31). This stylistic device is also found in other works from the Second Temple period, such as the Book of Sirach and the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as in the liturgical poetry of medieval Spanish Jewry.

19 See also: *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah* 1878, 7:18; *Midrash Lekach Tov - Pesikta Zutreta*, 1880, 1:1.

fore, the book is written in alphabetical order. Rabbi Nehemiah says it is because they transgressed the Torah, as it is written, 'And all Israel have transgressed Your Torah' (Daniel 9:11); therefore, it is written in alphabetical order. The Rabbis say it is because they transgressed from Aleph to Tav" (*Midrash Eicha Rabbah* 1899, 56).[20]

However, a deeper analysis reveals a special connection between the use of the acrostic and the content and purpose of the book. Deep emotional expressions typically emerge spontaneously and without restraint, without any particular order. In contrast, the use of the acrostic form creates tension between emotion and the rigid structure. This calculated writing style conveys an educational message to readers, suggesting that Lamentations was written with profound, rational thought about the tragic events of destruction. The artistic form of the acrostic conveys an intellectual message, not merely an emotional one. As a result, the poet of the Lamentations composed a didactic, educational work with a message for the reader, rather than simply expressing spontaneous grief and sorrow over loss, death, and destruction.[21]

2.2. Lamentations Chapter 1

This chapter is structured as an alphabetical acrostic, consisting of 22 verses, each corresponding to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse presents a striking image of the disaster. The chapter begins by depicting the dire situation of the city after the destruction. A clear motif emerges throughout the chapter, depicting Jerusalem as a lonely woman with no one to comfort her. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first (1-11) presents the lament for Jerusalem in the third person, while in the second part (12-22), Jerusalem speaks in the first person. The description is so vivid that it seems the author is writing from personal experience. The central motifs in the lament include: Jerusalem's fall at the hands of the enemy; the enslavement of the people of Zion; widespread slaughter; the desecration of the Temple and the looting of its treasures; the severe famine in the city following the siege; the betrayal by the allies of the Kingdom of Judah; and the enemy's mocking of Judah's dire condition.

The lament opens with a description of Jerusalem's loneliness following the exile of her children. The author compares Jerusalem's loneliness to that of a widow, sitting alone and forsaken: "Alas! Lonely sits the city, once great with people! She that was great among nations is become like a widow" (Lam 1:1). Widows and orphans were considered the most vulnerable members of society in

20 See also: *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Shabbat 55a; *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Avodah Zarah 4a; *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 1993, 818, and *Midrash Ruth Zuta* 1894, 54.

21 For further discussion on the connection between the use of the acrostic and the content and purpose of the book, see: Assis 2020, 14-15.

the ancient Near East, as the father was the one who provided protection and sustenance. Therefore, the Torah repeatedly warns against mistreating widows and orphans.[22] Judah's situation is as defenseless and hopeless as that of a widow, due to the betrayal by her neighbors and allies: "All her allies have betrayed her; They have become her foes" (Lam 1:2). From a kingdom with political, military, and economic independence, Judah has become a colony of forced laborers, obligated to pay tribute to the Babylonian conqueror. The streets and gates of the city, which were "Once great with people!" (Lam 1:1), have now become desolate: "Zion's roads are in mourning, Empty of festival pilgrims; All her gates are deserted." (Lam 1:4). The author uses antithetical parallelism—Jerusalem, once a bustling city during the pilgrimage festivals, is now a deserted one.

The author describes Jerusalem as נידה-nida: "Jerusalem has greatly sinned, therefore she is become a *nida*. All who admired her despise her, for they have seen her disgraced; And she can only sigh And shrink back" (Lam 1:8). The term "nida" can be interpreted in several ways, and indeed, commentators have disagreed on its meaning in this context. One interpretation is that Jerusalem is impure like the impurity of a woman in a state of menstrual separation,[23] suggesting that, just as one must keep a distance from a menstruating woman to avoid ritual impurity, so too, all people are now avoiding contact with Jerusalem. A supporting interpretation is found in the next verse, "Her uncleanness clings to her skirts" (Lam 1:9), where the poet implies that Jerusalem's sins have stained her, much like the impurity of a woman in her menstruation. Another interpretation, based on the root נוד (meaning "to wander"), suggests that "nida" refers to Jerusalem's exile, or wandering, as she is now in captivity and dispersion (Rashi 1859, Lamentations 1:8). Another possible interpretation is based on the root ניד in the sense of "mockery" – meaning that the nations who once honored her now mock her as her children go into exile (Ibn Ezra 1859, Lamentations 1:8).

The poet also describes the painful and humiliating plundering of the Temple's treasures by the Chaldeans: "The foe has laid hands on everything dear to her. She has seen her Sanctuary invaded by nations which You have denied admission into our community" (Lam 1:10). To highlight the extent of the humiliation, the poet emphasizes that the plunderers were from nations whom the Torah specifically forbids from entering the congregation of Israel.[24] These very people entered the Temple and desecrated and looted it. As we mentioned earlier, in the second half of the chapter (verses 11-22, except for verse 17), the poet shifts to speaking in the

22 Exodus 22:21-23; Deuteronomy 14:29, 24:17; Maimonides 1974, Hilchot Deot, chapter 6; HaLevi 1999, Commandment 65; *Mishna* 1987, Shvuot 7:7; *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Gittin 37a; *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Baba Kama 37a.

23 See Leviticus 15:19-24; HaLevi 1999, Commandment 181; Dadon 2009, 278. In this direction it was translated to Croatian: "kao nečistoća ženina."

24 The Ammonites and Moabites—see Deuteronomy 23:4-6, and Rashi 1859, Lamentations 1:10.

name of Jerusalem. Jerusalem pleads for empathy from passersby, asking them "Is there any agony like mine" (Lam 1:12). The punishment and divine anger are unbearable, hurting even the innocent suffer: "My priests and my elders have perished in the city" (Lam 1:19). However, Jerusalem accepts the harsh divine judgment and acknowledges her guilt: "The LORD is in the right, for I have disobeyed Him" (Lam 1:18). After the lament, Jerusalem prays that God will recognize the wickedness of her enemies, who pretended to be her friends, and treat them as He has treated her.

2.3. Lamentations Chapter 2

The second chapter follows the same acrostic structure as the first. However, while chapter 1 focuses on the dire and degraded state of Jerusalem following the destruction, chapter 2 specifically addresses the destruction itself, the loss of Jerusalem's honor, and the theological crisis that the people face. The loss of honor is expressed in verse: "My liver is poured out on the ground" (Lam 2:11), as the liver symbolized, in the ancient world, the seat of life and emotions. This reflects the deep anguish and emotional turmoil of the speaker, as the liver, considered vital for human existence and emotional well-being, is metaphorically depicted as being shattered and spilled out.[25] Jerusalem's honor is mocked by the neighboring nations: "All who pass your way Clap their hands at you; They hiss and wag their head at Fair Jerusalem: 'Is this the city that was called Perfect in Beauty, Joy of All the Earth?'" (Lam 2:15). In the Bible, clapping of hands is a sign of derision (Job 27:23) or anger (Num 24:10).

The theological crisis is expressed, on one hand, through the absence of Torah and spiritual leadership: "Instruction (Heb. Torah) is no more; Her prophets, too, receive no vision from the LORD" (Lam 2:9). The absence of prophecy and the death or exile of many scholars following the destruction are seen as causes of this spiritual void. On the other hand, the depth of the crisis is further reflected in the final verses of the chapter, where the poet directs harsh words towards God.

The first part of the chapter (verses 1-9) describes the destruction using severe language, emphasizing that God was the one who executed and allowed the brutal devastation. The second part (verses 10-12) shifts to the human responses to the tragedy, focusing on the mourning rituals of the *daughter of Zion*, specifically the elders of Jerusalem. The poet describes traditional mourning customs such as sitting on the ground, sprinkling ashes on one's head, and wearing sackcloth (2:10).

25 See: "liver in the dust" (Ps 7:6) as a vivid biblical image symbolizing humiliation, disgrace, or total defeat. To have the liver "in the dust" suggests being brought to the lowest point—physically, emotionally, or spiritually. This metaphor aligns with the theme of utter desecration or dishonour, a concept often employed in biblical poetry to convey profound sorrow, repentance, or the consequences of divine judgment.

These mourning practices are found throughout the Hebrew Bible and are still observed in Jewish mourning traditions today (Dadon 2025, 37-59; Avi-Yona and Malamat, 1959, II. 164; Dadon 2009, 452-460).

The peak of human suffering and degradation described in this chapter is the depiction of severe famine and its horrific consequences. The poet recounts the earlier phase in chapter 1: "They have bartered their treasures for food, to keep themselves alive" (1:11), indicating that the people sold whatever was most valuable to sustain themselves during the hunger. The Croatian translation renders "treasures" as jewels, but traditional and modern interpretations suggest that "treasures" (Heb. מחמדיהם) refers to young children, who were likely sold into slavery in exchange for food. This is further emphasized in the verse: "He slew all who delighted the eye (Heb. מחמדי עין)" (Lam 2:4).[26]

In chapter 2, the situation worsens and reaches its climax with the shocking description of women eating their children: "Alas, women eat their own fruit, Their new-born babes!" (Lam 2:20). This is an unfathomable contrast between a mother's compassion for her children and the brutality of eating her child. This description is reminiscent of the curses in Leviticus: "You shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters" (Lev 26:29), and also appears in the rebuke section of Deuteronomy: "You shall eat your own tissue, the flesh of your sons and daughters that your God has assigned to you, because of the desperate straits to which your enemy shall reduce you" (Deut 28:53). These two passages represent prophetic warnings that, tragically, came to pass.[27] The same level of horror can be found in other parts of the Bible (e.g., 2 Kgs 6:28-30).

Additionally, the prophet describes the killing of priests and prophets—symbolizing innocent righteous people: "Alas, priest and prophet are slain in the Sanctuary of the Lord!?" (Lam 2:20). In the Midrash on this verse, the death of Zechariah ben Jehoiada the priest is interpreted through a dialogue between Jeremiah and the Holy Spirit:

> "And you shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters shall you eat" (Leviticus 26:29), (this verse was interpreted in the context of:) Doeg ben Yosef, who passed away and left behind a small son. Each year, the child's mother would measure his growth in handbreadths and offer his weight in gold to Heaven. However, when Jerusalem was besieged, she slaughtered him with her own hands and consumed him. Concerning this tragedy, Jeremiah lamented, saying, "Master of the Universe, Alas, women eat their own fruit, Their new-born babes!" In response, the Divine Presence replied, "Alas, priest and prophet are slain in the Sanctuary of the Lord," this refers to Zechariah, son of Jehoiada the priest (*Midrash Sifra* 1862, Bechukotai, Parasha 2).

26 See similarly in Hosea 9:16, as well see: Zakovitch and Shinan 2017, 50.

27 For further exploration of fulfilled biblical prophecies, see: Dadon 2020, 395-428.

This midrash starkly illustrates the profound suffering and moral collapse experienced during the siege of Jerusalem. It draws a connection between the fulfillment of dire biblical prophecies and the desecration of the sacred, represented by the murder of Zechariah the priest in the Temple. The juxtaposition of maternal love with unthinkable actions underscores the extremity of the famine and societal breakdown.

In the third part of the lament (13-19), the poet attempts to comfort the *daughter of Zion* in her profound grief, calling her to mourn and seek God with all her heart: "Arise, cry out in the night at the beginning of the watches, pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord! Lift up your hands to Him for the life of your infants" (Lam 2:19). Yet, despite this call, the people of Zion, overwhelmed by their immense loss and suffering, remain in denial, unwilling to acknowledge their sins. Instead, they lash out against God, blaming Him for their suffering (Lam 2:20, 22).

2.4. Lamentations Chapter 3

The third chapter markedly differs from the other laments within the book. Unlike the other chapters, it does not explicitly lament the destruction of Jerusalem or the preceding tragic events. Instead, the poet focuses on his suffering and tribulations. This chapter raises theological questions about divine justice and the relationship between sin and punishment, questions reminiscent of the Book of Job and its exploration of the human spiritual journey. In this way, the chapter uniquely captures the intimate and personal dimensions of destruction.

From a literary and stylistic perspective, this chapter is notable for its differences: It does not open with the word *eicha* ("How"), which is a hallmark of the other chapters. The structure features a unique triple alphabetical acrostic. The verses are more concise, adding to the emotional intensity of the lament.

The chapter begins with an escalating description of the lamenter's suffering (1-18). In the second part (19-39), the lamenter overcomes his hopelessness and derives spiritual insights from his suffering despite his initial despair. He reaffirms his faith in God, prays with renewed vigor, accepts his afflictions as just punishment for his sins, and acknowledges the righteousness of divine judgment. In the third part (40-47), the lamenter shifts to addressing the collective plight of his people, urging them to reflect on their actions and return to God. He resumes describing the horrors of the destruction, emphasizing the suffering of the nation and the concealment of God's presence. In the fourth section (48-66), the lamenter returns to the singular voice, lamenting both his suffering and the collective sorrows of his people. He expresses confidence that God sees his afflictions and will ultimately deliver him. The chapter concludes with an appeal for divine retribution against the poet's adversaries.

The chapter begins with the phrase: "I am the man who has known affliction under the rod of His wrath" (Lam 3:1). This opening has sparked extensive discussion about the identity of the speaker, referred to as *the man* (Heb. גבר), who is lamenting his fate. Rashi identifies "the man" as the prophet Jeremiah as he was a priest from a family chosen for divine service, and due to his unique role as a witness to the destruction[28]: "'I am the man who has seen affliction'—Jeremiah laments, stating, 'I am the man who endured more suffering than all the prophets who prophesied the destruction of the Temple. In their days, the Temple was not destroyed, but in my time, it was'" (Rashi 1859, Lamentations 3:1). Others argue that this lament reflects the collective suffering of the Jewish people during the destruction (Ibn Ezra 1859, Lamentations 3:1). The speaker represents the Jewish nation as a whole. The Midrashic Interpretation identifies the "man" as Job: "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: 'I am the man'—I am Job, as it is written: What man is like Job, who drinks mockery like water' (Job 34:7)" *(Midrash Eicha Rabbah* 1878, 3). We can assume that this interpretation is based on the recurrence of the term *gever* four times in this chapter, a frequent epithet for Job. Additionally, the thematic parallels between Lamentations 3 and Job, both of which explore profound suffering and the search for divine justice, may have led to this conclusion.

The third chapter of Lamentations stands apart as an intimate and spiritual reflection on suffering amidst national catastrophe. Its distinctive structure and focus on personal tribulation allow it to serve as a poignant exploration of divine justice and human resilience. Whether the "man" symbolizes Jeremiah, Job, or the collective Jewish experience, the chapter transcends its historical context, resonating with universal questions of faith, suffering, and redemption.

2.5. Lamentations Chapter 4

The fourth lament focuses on the description of the siege and destruction, similar to chapter 2. This chapter portrays the stages of the siege and devastation in a gradual progression. Its literary structure consists of an alphabetical acrostic of 22 verses.

In the first section (1-10), there is a vivid and harrowing depiction of the suffering caused by the siege of Jerusalem, including a shocking portrayal of starvation within the city. Particularly distressing is the description of infants and nursing babies, who are the most vulnerable during a siege: "The tongue of the suckling cleaves to its palate for thirst. Little children beg for bread; None gives them a morsel" (Lam 4:4) and later on: "With their own hands, tenderhearted women have cooked their children" (Lam 4:10). The lamenter draws a dual comparison between the merciless treatment of children by their parents and the behaviors of two animals: jackals and ostriches. "Even jackals offer the breast

28 Several verses in the chapter (3:52-57) allude to the event of Jeremiah's imprisonment (Jer 37).

and suckle their young; But my poor people has turned cruel, Like ostriches of the desert" (Lam 4:3). Even a predator like the jackal shows compassion by nursing its young. However, the children of Jerusalem are subjected to merciless neglect as survival instincts override maternal care. The comparison to ostriches reflects their reputedly cruel behavior of abandoning their offspring in the wilderness, a metaphor for the breakdown of social cohesion in Israel.[29] The author transitions from the suffering of children to the losses among the elite of the nation: "Her elect (Heb. *nazirites*[30] – referring to those of noble status) were purer than snow, whiter than milk; Their limbs were ruddier than coral" (Lam 4:7).

In the second part (11-20), the lamenter depicts Jerusalem's humiliation due to its sins, the loss of its political autonomy, and the behavior of its enemies. The lamenter attributes the destruction to the corruption of the nation's leadership: "It was for the sins of her prophets, the iniquities of her priests, who had shed in her midst the blood of the just" (Lam 4:13). The priests and false prophets are accused of moral corruption and failing in their duties. Their reliance on alliances with neighboring nations, rather than trusting in God, contributed to the downfall. At the end of this section, a historical event is referenced—the capture of one of the kings of the House of David: "Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles in the sky; They chased us in the mountains, lay in wait for us in the wilderness. The breath of our life, the LORD's anointed, was captured in their traps, he in whose shade we had thought to live among the nations" (Lam 4:19-20). The identity of this "the LORD's anointed" (משיח ה') is debated. Talmudic sources[31] suggest King Josiah, supported by the verse: "Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah which all the singers, male and female, recited in their laments for Josiah, as is done to this day; they became customary in Israel and were incorporated into the laments" (2 Chr 35:25). Others argue for King Zedekiah, who was captured by the Babylonians and tortured.[32]

In the third and last section (21-22), the lamenter concludes with a prayer for divine retribution against the Kingdom of Edom, who rejoices over the destruction of Jerusalem and harasses the city's refugees: "Rejoice and exult, Fair Edom, who dwell in the land of Uz! To you, too, the cup shall pass, You shall get drunk and expose your nakedness. Your iniquity, Fair Zion, is expiated; He will exile you no longer. Your iniquity, Fair Edom, He will note; He will uncover your sins" (Lam 4:21-22). This phenomenon of anger toward nations that rejoice in Israel's

29 See Rashi 1859, Lamentations 4:3; See also Klein 2017, Lamentations 4:3.

30 Rashi explain Nazirites: "Her princes, like נֵזֶר and כֶּתֶר (=a crown). But I say actual Nazirites, who had long hair and were very handsome, and the antecedent is 'of my people'" (Rashi 1859, Lamentations 4:7). This term has been translated in the Croatian translation as "her youth."

31 *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Taanit 22b; *Jerusalem Talmud* 1523, Shabbat 16:1; see also Rashi 1859, Lamentations 4:20.

32 See: 2 Kings, 25:4-6. See also: *Midrash Lekach Tov - Pesikta Zutreta* 1880, 4:20.

downfall is also seen in other biblical prophecies (Ob 1:12-13). However, Edom's place in this context raises some interpretative challenges. In rabbinic literature, Edom is often identified with the Roman Empire.[33] Yet, the destruction of the First Temple is exclusively tied to Babylon. Rashi addressed this apparent discrepancy by proposing that Jeremiah's prophecy in Lamentations referred to the destruction of the Second Temple, which would be carried out by the Romans (Rashi 1859, Lamentations 4:21). It is also possible to maintain that Edom here refers to the historical Edomites, which was a neighboring kingdom to the southeast of the Kingdom of Israel during the First Temple period, who betrayed Jerusalem during the First Temple period, as echoed by the psalmist: "Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall; how they cried, "Strip her, strip her to her very foundations!" (Ps 137:7). So, the association with Edom in this verse carries a dual or symbolic meaning, bridging the historical context of the First Temple and later events involving Rome.

2.6. Lamentations Chapter 5

The fifth chapter of Lamentations, which concludes the book, is fundamentally distinct from the preceding chapters in two ways. Literary structure: unlike other chapters, it does not follow the alphabetical acrostic pattern, nor does it open with the word "איכה", as seen in chapter 3. Furthermore, its verses are brief, consisting of only two clauses each, making it the shortest chapter in the book. Content and style: the chapter is entirely a communal prayer to God, expressing the people's immense distress. Both in its thematic essence and its literary form—reminiscent of a classical psalm of supplication—this chapter could easily be regarded as an additional psalm within Psalms.

The prayer in chapter 5 can be divided into three sections: Opening Appeal (1-14) – community's plea for God to remember and not ignore their suffering: "Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; Behold, and see our disgrace" (Lam 5:1). The text portrays a nation reduced to a state of vulnerability: orphans and widows, with their possessions plundered by strangers and their living conditions rendered dire. The second section (15-18) laments the devastating destruction of the Temple, symbolized as the crown of the nation: "The crown[34] has fallen from our head" (Lam 5:16). The grief over Zion is poignantly conveyed: "Because of this our hearts are sick, because of these our eyes are dimmed: Because of Mount

33 *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Gittin 57b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Avodah Zarah 10a-b; *Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Yoma 10a; *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 1878, Parashat Toledot, paragraph 67; *Midrash Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer* 1948, Chapter 38; and *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah* 1878, paragraph 5.

34 Ibn Ezra interprets the "crown" as a metaphor for the Temple (Ibn Ezra 1859, Lamentations 5:16). In the Croatian translation translated as "vijenac."

Zion, which lies desolate; Jackals prowl over it" (Lam 5:17-18). The vivid imagery underscores the physical and spiritual desolation caused by the Temple's ruin. The third section (19-22) is a prayer for restoration, a supplication for God to never forget His people and to restore their former glory. This plea is preceded by an affirmation of God's eternal reign: "But You, O LORD, are enthroned forever, Your throne endures through the ages" (Lam 5:19).

The poet acknowledges the eternal nature of God's sovereignty, contrasting it with the temporal existence of the Temple. This distinction suggests that the relationship between God and Israel transcends the physical structure of the Temple, a theme echoed in other places.[35] This chapter encapsulates the psychological progression of the book's narrative and the emotional journey of those who lived through the destruction. It begins with raw defiance and denial, much like Job's protestations against his fate. This is followed by a process of acceptance and acknowledgment of divine justice, which reaches its peak in chapters 3 and 4. Ultimately, it concludes with a complete prayer infused with hope for redemption and renewal in chapter 5. The final verses strike a balance between hope and realism, expressing both the possibility of restoration and the lingering fear of rejection: "Take us back, O LORD, to Yourself, and let us come back; Renew our days as of old! For truly, You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us" (Lam 5:21-22). Thus, the chapter reflects the profound complexity of the post-destruction era, blending despair with an enduring aspiration for reconciliation and renewal.

2.7. Linguistic Features in the Book of Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations exhibits several notable linguistic characteristics that reflect the nature of biblical poetry. Below is a brief overview of some of these features:

2.7.1. Contribution to Modern Hebrew Expressions

Many idioms and expressions commonly used in modern Hebrew originate from Lamentations. These phrases have endured through centuries, illustrating the profound influence of the book on the Hebrew language.

- "יעיב" *(yaʿiv)*: The term appears in the verse: "How the Lord has clouded in His anger" (Lam 2:1). This rare word derives from "עב" *(ʿav)*, meaning "cloud," and signifies "to darken." It is an example of how Lamentations employs evocative and unique diction.
- "קרן" *(qeren):* The term appears in the verse: "He has cut down in fierce anger all the horn of Israel" (Lam 2:3). The word קרן ("horn") is a literary

35 See, for example, Jeremiah 3:16.

motif drawn from the animal kingdom. In biblical usage, a horn often symbolizes strength (Mic 4:13) or honor (Ps 112:9).

- "נפלה עטרת ראשנו" (*naflah ʿaṭeret roshenu*): This phrase appears in the verse: "The crown has fallen from our head" (Lam 5:16). This phrase has become a modern idiom to express a profound loss or mourning, frequently used in memorial notices.

2.7.2. Influence of Late Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic

The text of *Lamentations* reflects linguistic phenomena characteristic of late Biblical Hebrew, influenced by Aramaic, the spoken language of the time. These include:

- Plural endings with "ין" instead of "ים": For example:
  - "כל שעריה שוממין" ("All her gates are desolate," 1:4).
  - "גם תנין חלצו שד" ("Even jackals offer the breast," 4:3). This shift, aligning with Aramaic usage, marks the evolving linguistic landscape of the post-exilic period.
- Use of "אני" (*ani*) for the first-person pronoun instead of "אנכי" (*anokhi*): This usage mirrors the Aramaic "אנה" (*ʾana*). Examples include:
  - "For these things I weep" (בוכיה **אני** - *ani bokhiyah*, 1:16).
  - "They have heard that I groan" (נאנחה **אני** *nʾanakhah ani*, 1:21). Similar forms appear in 3:1 and 3:63, further reflecting Aramaic's influence on biblical Hebrew.

Lamentations also demonstrates other influential features, however, it is beyond the scope and framework of this paper.[36]

3. The Jewish Perspective on the Problem of Suffering

An analysis of the Book of Lamentations reveals a harrowing depiction of human suffering, suggesting that the text does not offer simple explanations. The theological and existential question of why suffering exists finds a complex response in the book. On the one hand, Lamentations expresses a deep belief in the justice of God: "The LORD is in the right" (Lam 1:18). Suffering is portrayed as the result of human sin, as emphasized in "Jerusalem has greatly sinned" (Lam 1:8). The text reinforces the idea of divine justice governing the world, where human actions inevitably lead to consequences. This belief is encapsulated in verses such as: "The kindness of the LORD has not ended, His mercies are not spent. They are renewed every morning, Ample is Your grace!" (Lam 3:22-23).

36 For further exploration of the linguistic features in Lamentations, see: Kogut 1971, 213-219.

Conversely, the suffering described in Lamentations also originates from divine wrath, which is depicted as overwhelming and indiscriminate. The text portrays God's anger as a destructive force that affects both the guilty and the innocent: "See, O LORD, and behold, To whom You have done this! Alas, women eat their own fruit, Their new-born babes! Alas, priest and prophet are slain In the Sanctuary of the Lord!" (Lam 2:20). The scale of punishment appears disproportionate, with the righteous suffering alongside the sinners. Particularly poignant is the suffering of children and infants, who bear the brunt of the calamity despite their innocence. The ultimate expression of this tragedy is the starvation that compels parents to consume their offspring.

The book does not shy away from the sense of injustice inherent in human suffering. From a human perspective, the destruction and pain appear cruel and unwarranted. Yet, Lamentations insists on preserving the concept of divine justice, even when it is incomprehensible to mortals. This creates a profound theological paradox, On the one hand, humanity clings to the belief in a moral and just God. On the other hand, this same God is perceived as the source of suffering and evil. The sages of the rabbinic tradition grappled with the tension between suffering and divine providence, seeking to offer frameworks for understanding.

The Talmud explores the connection between a person's actions and the punishments imposed upon them. In particular, due to its importance to our discussion, we will quote this paragraph:

> Rav Ami said: There is no death without sin; and there is no suffering without iniquity. There is no death without sin, as it is written: "Only the person who sins shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child's guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to them alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to them alone" (Ezekiel 18:20). And there is no suffering without iniquity, as it is written: "I will punish their transgression with the rod, their iniquity with plagues" (Psalms 89:33). The ministering angels said before the Holy One, "Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, why did You penalize Adam, the first man, with the death penalty?" He said to them: "I gave him a simple mitzva,[37] and he violated it." They said to Him, "Didn't Moses and Aaron, who observed the whole Tora in its entirety, nevertheless die?" (He) said to them: "All things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good…" (Ecclesiastes 9:2). (Apparently, death is not dependent upon one's actions. Everyone dies). He (Rav Ami) stated in accordance

37 Mitzva – a religious obligation, a godly deed; *tarjag mitzvot*: 613 mitzvot; the term for 365 prohibitions and 248 commandments from the Torah, which a religious Jew must observe; the word tarjag is the pronunciation of the number 613 written in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (tav=400, resh=200, yud=10, gimel=3). One part deals with a person's relationship with God, and the other part with a person's relationship with people. The obligation to fulfill mitzvot applies to women over 12 years and one day old (*bat mitzvah*), and to men over 13 years and one day old (*bar mitzvah*). Dadon 2009, 335.

> with this tana,[38] as it was taught: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Even Moses and Aaron died due to their sin, as it is stated: "And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron: Because you did not believe in Me…" (Numbers 20:12). Had you believed in Me (and spoken to the rock as commanded), your time would not yet have come to leave the world. (Apparently, even Moses and Aaron died due to their sins). Four (people) died due to (Adam's sin with) the serpent, (in the wake of which death was decreed upon all of mankind, although they themselves were free of sin). And they are: Benjamin, son of Jacob; Amram, father of Moses; Yishai, father of David; and Kilab, son of David… Learn from it that there is death without sin and there is suffering without iniquity (*Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Shabbat 55a, 55b).

The Talmud implies unequivocally that there are individuals who have died without any wrongdoing. According to the Talmud's conclusion, it is possible for a person who has committed no sin to endure suffering and even die. In other words, there is not necessarily a direct correlation between a person's behavior and the calamities that befall them. This raises the question of how to reconcile this with the assertion in Ecclesiastes: "For there is no righteous person on earth who does good and does not sin" (Eccl 7:20).

The *Tosafot*[39] suggest that the author of Ecclesiastes refers to the majority of people. Most humans are indeed sinners, but there are exceptional cases of righteous individuals who are sinless. Maimonides, in his legal codex (Maimonides 1974, Hilchot Berachot 2:8; Maimonides 1974, Hilchot Shabbat 2:3),[40] rules in accordance with the Talmud that death can occur without sin, and suffering without iniquity. However, in his philosophical work *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides takes a seemingly opposite stance:

> We, however, believe that all these human affairs are managed with justice; far be it from God to do wrong, to punish anyone unless the punishment is necessary and merited. It is distinctly stated in the Law, that all is done in accordance with justice; and the words of our Sages generally express the same idea. They clearly say: "There is no death without sin, no sufferings without transgression" (*Babylonian Talmud* 1999, Shabbat, 55a). And they said, "The deserts of an are meted out to him in the same measure which he himself employs" (*Mishna* 1987, Sotah, 1:7). These are the words of the Mishna. Our Sages declare it wherever opportunity is given, that the idea of God necessarily implies justice; that He will reward the most pious for all their pure and

38 Tannaim (Aramaic: *tanaim*, singular: *tana*) – "those who learn and repeat what they have learned"; rabbis from the era of the Mishnah, as during their time the Oral Torah was still transmitted orally, so they had to memorize it and repeat it aloud to each other. See also: Dadon 2009, 512-515.

39 See: Tosafot Commentary on *Babylonian Talmud 1999*, Shabat 55b, paragraph "Arba'ah metu bee'tjo shel Nachash."

40 Similarly ruled by Rabbi Yosef Karo in his codex *Shulchan Aruch*, Yoreh De'ah 376:1.

> upright actions, although no direct commandment was given them through a prophet; and that He will punish all the evil deeds of men, although they have not been prohibited by a prophet, if common sense warns against them, as e.g., injustice and violence. Thus our Sages say: "God does not deprive any being of the full reward (of its good deed)" (*Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Pesachim 118a, Baba Kama 38b) again, "He who says that God remits part of a punishment, will be punished severely; He is long-suffering, but is sure to exact payment" (*Babylonian Talmud* 1961, Baba Kama 50a, *Bereshit Rabbah* 67:4)... The same principle is expressed in all sayings of our Sages" (Maimonides 2005, III:17, 311-312).

From an examination of these statements by Maimonides, it becomes evident that his philosophical view on divine providence contradicts the position presented in his halakhic codex. It is worth emphasizing that he elaborates on this view in great detail and in a systematic manner in his philosophical work, making it clear that this is not a mistake. Why, then, does he argue in his philosophical work that divine justice is absolute, leaving no room for death without sin or suffering without transgression?

Some explain that, according to Maimonides, philosophical and theological matters lie outside the realm of Talmudic halakhic rulings. Therefore, the conclusions of the Talmud should not be regarded as binding on such issues (HaMeiri 1974, Shabbat 55a). The Talmudic discourse we reviewed is not theological or philosophical in nature but is instead based entirely on the interpretation of biblical verses and Talmudic statements concerning the principle of divine providence. Hence, in his philosophical work, Maimonides does not feel bound by the Talmudic position. Nachmanides, on the other hand, interprets the Talmudic conclusion differently. In his view, the conclusion is not that there is no justice in the world, but rather that sometimes death and suffering that befall a person are not a result of their behavior but are instead connected to the actions of their ancestors. For instance, humanity was punished with mortality due to the original sin of Adam and Eve (Nachmanides 1963, 118).

The prevailing position of Jewish thinkers regarding divine providence, as presented in the biblical verses and rabbinic literature, is unequivocal: divine justice is absolute and beyond question. However, personal and historical experiences sometimes raise questions that human intellect is unable to resolve. The approach of the Sages is that we must believe in God's providence even when reality appears to contradict it. It is essential to understand that the happiness of a particular person does not indicate their righteousness, nor do the sufferings of others indicate their wickedness (Dadon 2009, 650-661). This duality—acknowledging pain while maintaining hope—mirrors the rabbinic approach to suffering, which seeks meaning and redemption even amidst profound tragedy. Thus, the Jewish response to suffering is not to resolve the paradox but to live within it, affirming

faith while grappling with its complexities. This message is the central theme of the Book of Job, but it is also highly relevant to the Book of Lamentations.

Conclusion

The Book of Lamentations, on one hand, describes the difficult situation during the destruction, and on the other, it guides us on how to cope both theologically and psychologically with the consequences of the national catastrophe. One can view the Book of Lamentations as a kind of drama, with several different characters speaking at various times. Primarily, there are the figures of the mourner and the woman, *daughter of Zion*, who represents the exiled people of Jerusalem, the generation of destruction. There is a distinctive feature of the mourner in the Book of Lamentations that sets him apart from the "biblical narrator" encountered in other biblical books. The typical biblical narrator always knows everything in detail but is not part of the story; he is external to it. However, the mourner in Lamentations is deeply involved in the story; he experiences the harsh events and suffering. A person's reaction to an unexpected disaster is usually a response composed of a series of reactions. These responses include shock, denial, silence, weeping, struggle, or acceptance and submission to injustice and fate. The response may also be hope or a fall into the abyss of despair. In the book's chapters, particularly in chapter 3, we find this series of reactions in the mourner. His responses are sometimes contradictory, revealing the depth of his pain. His final response, which ends with a plea for revenge against the enemies who destroyed his home and ravaged his land, also reveals the profundity of his sorrow.

At the beginning of the article, we provided an overview of the background to the writing of the Book of Lamentations, its name, the question of its authorship, and its place among the books of the Hebrew Bible. We then analyzed the book from a literary perspective, emphasizing the literary genre of lamentation in biblical poetry and the structural composition of the book. In our study, we examined the five chapters of the book, highlighting unique linguistic, stylistic, and literary features that indicate, among other things, the transmission of an educational and didactic message to the reader, which goes far beyond the spontaneous expression of pain over loss, death, and destruction. The Book of Lamentations contains profound and rational reflections on the devastating events of the destruction, offering an intellectual message rather than just an emotional one. Additionally, we saw that various linguistic phenomena in the book influenced both ancient and modern Hebrew. In the final section of the article, intending to bridge the human sense of injustice with the divine justice that governs the world—a central theme in the Book of Lamentations—we explored rabbinic literature to understand Judaism's perspective on the question of suffering and pain in the world. This immense human suffering, which the biblical author succeeded in describing

so vividly in the Book of Lamentations by depicting the horrors of the destruction of Jerusalem, raises important theological questions. According to Judaism, divine justice and providence exist in the world, even though we encounter difficult situations throughout history or in our lives that seemingly create a theological paradox. The happiness or suffering of any individual does not serve as proof of their righteousness or wickedness.

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Kotel Dadon

Poezija patnje u Tužaljkama – književna analiza

Sažetak

Knjiga Tužaljki od velikog je značaja za židovsku kulturu. Budući da odražava opetovane nesreće i tragične događaje koji su oblikovali židovsko nacionalno iskustvo tijekom povijesti, njezin utjecaj proteže se izvan njezinih religioznih dimenzija. U ovom članku autor nudi razrađenu književnu i teološku analizu Knjige Tužaljki, naglašavajući njezinu važnost unutar židovske kulture i religijske tradicije. Knjiga se istražuje ne samo kao izraz žalosti nad traumatičnim razaranjem Jeruzalema i Prvoga Hrama u 6. stoljeću pr. n. e. nego i kao strukturirano pjesničko djelo koji sadrži edukativne, didaktičke i moralne poruke. Članak je podijeljen na tri glavna dijela. Prvi dio pruža općenit i sažet uvod koji čitatelju može pomoći u razumijevanju raznih vidova knjige, uključujući njezinu povijesnu pozadinu, porijeklo njezina naslova, tradiciju njezina nastanka kao i mjesto u kanonu Hebrejske Biblije. Drugi i glavni dio članka analizira strukturu i književni žanr knjige kao i tematsku organizaciju njezinih pet poglavlja. Tu se ističu jedinstvena jezična obilježja Tužaljki i njihov utjecaj na hebrejski jezik i književnost, kako staru tako i modernu. Posljednji dio bavi se teološkim paradoksom vjere u pravednoga Boga usred patnje i nepravde, što je središnji motiv Knjige Tužaljki. Autor istražuje pravce nastojanja rabinske književnosti da stekne uvid u odgovor judaizma na pitanje patnje i nevolja u svijetu. Analiza uključuje odlomke rabinskih tekstova, povezujući klasičnu židovsku misao sa suvremenim raspravama. Članak spaja književne i teološke uvide, nudeći višeslojno razumijevanje Tužaljki kao kulturnoga, povijesnog i religijskog artefakta.