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**PHILIPPE GUILLAUME,
LAMENTATIONS 5: THE SEVENTH ACROSTIC**

LAMENTATIONS 5: THE SEVENTH ACROSTIC

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1. THE SEVENTH ACROSTIC

The final chapter of the book of Lamentations is not an alphabetic acrostic like the previous chapters. The first letters of its verses do not follow any pattern. Yet, the chapter totals twenty-two verses like the other alphabetic acrostics, a fact that remains a puzzle.¹ Did the people who write chapter 5 lack time to imitate the alphabetic sequence produced by their predecessors?² Is the lack of alphabetic pattern in chapter 5 the result of a larger pattern of crescendo culminating with three acrostics in chapter 3 followed by a decrescendo with one alphabetic acrostic in chapter 4 and none at all in chapter 5?³ Is the vanishing acrostic pattern suggestive of closure⁴ or is it an invitation to seek the acrostic in a different direction? Noting the strong similarities of chapter 5 with the line structure of alphabetic Ps 31:10–31; 25; 34, Daniel Noel Freedman considered the omission of the alphabetic device in Lamentations 5 as a modification, a “slight sophistication, of the original arrangement, and not the other way around.”⁵

Seeking the missing acrostic, Siegfried Bergler assembled the first letter of each verse according to the acrostic principle and got the following phrase:

¹ A. Berlin, *Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 116–7 downplays its significance, noting that Psalms 33 and 103 have 22 verses.

² As suggested by H. Ewald, *Die politischen Bücher des Alten Bundes* (Göttingen: 1839) and W. Vatke, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Bonn: 1886).

³ As suggested by C.W.E. Nägelbach, *Die Klagelieder* (Leipzig: 1868), 69 and D. Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Biblical Poetry* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 85.

⁴ See F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 140–1.

⁵ D.N. Freedman, “Acrostic Poems in the Hebrew Bible: Alphabetic and Otherwise,” *CBQ* 48 (1986), 408–31 (415).

זנים עם אעב ענש בו שנע ע אלהך

The succession of letters makes some sense except the two ע before אלהך at the end of the sequence. To ‘improve’ the reading, Bergler replaced the troublesome עs with two הs obtained by ignoring the first two words of verse 17 (...על זה היה...) and the first word of verse 18 (...על הר...). With this constrained device, Bergler obtained זנים עם אעב ענש בו שנהה אלהך, which he vocalizes as follows:

“*zōnim ‘am ‘ā’ib ‘ōneš buš šanāhāb ‘alohākā*”

“Die Abtrünnigen, (nämlich) das Volk verschmähe ich, (es) strafend mit Verachtung, wie dein Gott klagt” (i.e., “the apostates, a people I spurn, he punishes with contempt, as your God laments”).⁶

The need to ‘cheat’ at verses 17–18 to compose a weak phrase makes the reading less convincing as a whole.⁷ Hence, Berger’s article has dropped off most English-language bibliographies on the book of Lamentations.⁸ Yet, in light of the six acrostics in Lamentations 1–4 (1 each in chapters 1, 2 and 4 and three in chapter 3), his interpretation deserves more attention that it has received. Jannie Hunter considers Bergler’s discovery a valuable contribution and the first (זנים) and last (אלהך) words “looks quite conspicuous.”⁹

I suggest that Bergler’s acrostic can be improved by taking the troublesome עs seriously. Rather than changing them with other letters, they should be taken as they are. They supply an important clue for the way the acrostic should be read. Verses 17 and 18 are the only consecutive verses that start with identical letters and the initial ע of verse 17 would be the *only* initial letter in the correct position in the ע-פ sequence had chapter 5 been an alphabetic

⁶ S. Bergler, “Threni V: nur ein alphabetisierendes Lied? Versuch einer Deutung,” *VT* 27 (1977), 304–320 (317): “Die Abtrünnigen, (nämlich) das Volk verschmähe ich, (es) strafend mit Verachtung, wie dein Gott klagt.”

⁷ J. Renkema, «*Misschien is er Hoop...*» *De theologische Vooronderstellingen van het Boek Klaagliederen* (Franeker: Wever, 1983), 75; B. Johnson, “Form and message on Lamentations,” *ZAW* 97 (1985), 58–73 (70–71).

⁸ C. Westermann, *Lamentations* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), xiii; Berlin, *Lamentations*, xix; P.R. House, *Lamentations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 453 only list Bergler in their bibliography. I. Provan, *Lamentations* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991), 16 and E.S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 501 deem Bergler’s suggestion not very plausible. E. Assis maintains that the first letters of all the verses of Lamentations 5 have no significance whatsoever. See E. Assis “The Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations,” *CBQ* 69 (2007), 710–24 (note 2).

⁹ J. Hunter, *Faces of a Lamenting City* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 60.

acrostic like the previous chapters.¹⁰ Chapter 1 follows the common פ-ע sequence and places letter ע at verse 16. The other alphabetic poems, however, follow the less common ע-פ sequence. ע stands for the seventeenth letter in Lam 2:17; 3:49–51; 4:17 and in 5:17, a clue of the presence of some kind of acrostic in chapter 5. The second ע underlines the first one and isolates the last four lines of the Psalm (verses 19–22) that yields the word אלהך. This word can be completed with the telestic of the same verses. Telestics are the opposite of acrostics, reading the last rather than the first letter of each line in sequence. Acrostics are often used in combination with telestics.¹¹ The acrostic-telestic of verses 19–22 produces the following: מדהך רם מדהך “your god is exalted greatly.” The א of מאד is missing, but מאד is the final word of the entire book and its ד is the last letter of the telestic. Hence, מאד is actually written in full at the end of the book and of the telestic.

This is not the end of the story. A similar acrostic was discovered at the beginning of Lamentations 5.¹² The text in Lam. Rab., Prologue XXVII, assumes seven alphabetic acrostics in Lamentations but there are only six in the text. Azriel Rosenfeld identified a kind of colophon based on the first two words of chapter 5: זכר יהוה which he reads as “Zechariah.”¹³ Then, the mesotic (first letters of half verses) of the next verses produces הנביא:

- (1a) זכר יהוה מה היה לנו
 (1b) הביט וראה את חרפתנו
 (2a) נחלתנו נהפכה לזרים
 (2b) בתינו לנכרים
 (3a) יתומים היינו אין אב
 (3b) אמתינו כאלמנות

Rosenfeld’s suggestion for the initial verses of Lamentations 5 ties up with the acrostic-telestic in the final verses to frame the entire chapter with a pseudonym and a confession of faith. The

¹⁰ D.R. Hillers, *Lamentations* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), xxvii; J. Renkema, *Lamentations* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 47–49. N.C. Lee, *The Singers of Lamentations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 166 reads the reversal of the alphabetic order in Lam 2:16–17 as a foil against a “gloating group who loves retributive justice.”

¹¹ K. Spronk, “Acrostics in the Book of Nahum,” *ZAW* 110 (1998), 209–22.

¹² A. Rosenfeld, “Aqrostikon be-’ekhah pereq 5,” *Sinai* 110 (1992), צו.

¹³ S. Buber (ed.), *Eikha Rabbah* (Vilna: Widow and Brothers Romm, 1893), 31: אתם עברתם לפני שבע עבירות הרי ירמ' בא מקונן עליכם קינות שהוא שבע אלפא ביתן איכה ‘You committed seven transgressions before Me’; therefore Jeremiah came to utter over you *Lamentations* consisting of verses the initial letters of which form a sevenfold alphabet. *Eikah*. H. Freedman & M. Simon (eds), *Midrash Rabbah. Lamentations* (London: Soncino, 1939), 53.

first and the last words are written in full: זכריהוה at the beginning of verse 1 and מאד at the end of verse 22:

זכריה הנביא אלהך רם מד

Zechariah the prophet [says]: your God is greatly exalted!

This acrostic does not fulfil the Midrash's mention of a seventh *alphabetic* acrostic in the narrow sense, since verses 4–18 are merely filling in the body of the chapter between the two acrostics and the telestic to make up the 'alphabetic' length of 22 lines. The Midrash has no particular word for acrostics.¹⁴ The word 'alphabets' (אלפא ביתן) covers every kind of acrostics, alphabetic or not.¹⁵ As a final confirmation, the acrostic-mesotic-telestic in Lamentations 5 written in *scriptio plena* totals twenty-two letters (with the full tetragrammaton, the י in אלהך and the aleph of מאד):

זכריהוה הנביא אלהיך רם מאד

Hence, the twenty-two lines of the chapter signal the presence of a hidden alphabetic message.

2. LAMENT AND CONSOLATION

Acrostics are conspicuous in ancient literature. Finding letter games in Lamentations is no surprise. The note of confidence revealed by the game somewhat undermines the validity of lachrymose readings of the book. There is no denying the cruelties of war. The sufferings of the survivors are not over in a week or two.¹⁶ The book of Lamentations may suggest that the sufferings will only end with the restoration of Zion.¹⁷ Yet, the reminder of the Lord's greatness that concludes the book puts the complaint in perspective. The reader avoids "a perpetual lament commemorating inconsolable morning."¹⁸ The notion of inconsolable mourning defeats the point of mourning. Why mourn if no morning is expected to dawn? Mesopotamian city-laments anticipated the restoration of cities and they were probably composed on the eve of their restoration.¹⁹ The silence of God in Lamentations is broken by the scribe's acrostic confession of faith in the greatness of YHWH. The acrostic-telestic in Lamentations 5 makes a new dawn rise at the end of the book, a wink to the careful reader (acrostics are lost

¹⁴ B. Krupnik & A.M. Silberman, *A Dictionary of the Talmud, the Midrash and the Targum* (Tel Aviv: Barazani, 1996).

¹⁵ See N.M. Sarna, "Acrostics," in F. Skolnik (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica Second Edition* Vol. 1 (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 2007), 368–69.

¹⁶ X.H.T. Pham, *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: SAP, 1999), 147.

¹⁷ Pham, *Mourning*, 147.

¹⁸ A. Berlin, *Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 125.

¹⁹ D. Edelman, "The «Empty Land» as a Motif in City Laments," in G.J. Brooke & T. Römer (eds), *Ancient and Modern Scriptural Historiography* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 127–50 (130).

on listeners) who can read vertically as well as horizontally.²⁰ The ancient readers of Lamentations were better at reading vertically than were their modern colleagues.

3. AKIBA'S LAUGHTER AND THE SEVENTH ACROSTIC

Besides the mention of a seventh acrostic in Lam. Rab. (Prologue XXVII), the text there relieves the dark colour of the book with the "inclusion of a series of anecdotes in a lighter vein."²¹ The section on "For the mountain of Zion which is desolate" (Lam 5:18), records two occasions when Rabbi Akiba surprised his companions by rejoicing while they were weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem. To explain his behaviour, Akiba refers to Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah mentioned together in Isa 8:2. Akiba then quotes Jer 26:18 where Micah (rather than Uriah) announces the destruction of Jerusalem 'Zion will be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins' to which Zechariah replies that "old men and old women shall sit in the broad places of Jerusalem" (Zech 8:4). Akiba rejoices because Zechariah's oracle shall be fulfilled as surely as Uriah's was.²² Restoration will follow destruction. Akiba's laughter in the midst of mourning is in tune with Lamentation's seventh acrostic: *Zechariah the prophet [says]: your God is greatly exalted.*²³

²⁰ Pace K.M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 79 who claims that the book cannot sustain hope.

²¹ Freedman & Simon (eds), *Midrash Rabbah*, viii.

²² Freedman & Simon (eds), *Midrash Rabbah*, 243. G. Hasan-Rokem. *The Web of Life-Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 14.

²³ Research for this article was funded by the British Academy.