

THEOLOGY AND HOPE IN THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

It is difficult to discuss the theology of Lamentations as if there were a consistent, clearly identifiable theological system presupposed in the book. The diversity of opinions among modern exegetes demonstrates that it would be virtually impossible to find such a system in the Book of Lamentations. In the third section of the paper, I shall present some theological ideas emerging from the descriptions of suffering included in the analyzed text. I shall also try to identify traces of hope hidden among the mourning and lament over the destroyed city and the suffering of its people.

“WE HAVE TRANSGRESSED AND REBELLED,
AND YOU HAVE NOT FORGIVEN”

(Lam 3:42)

The Book of Lamentations shares a belief, common in the ancient Near East, that catastrophes, on both social and individual levels, are consequences

of sin or transgression of the law.⁴⁰ Such a belief is expressed throughout the book (cf. Lam 1:5, 8, 14, 18, 20, 22; 2:14; 3:39, 42; 5:7, 16). On this evidence, one might hypothesize that the roots of Lamentations are to be found in the Deuteronomistic theology, in which reward and punishment were perceived as immediate consequences of human behavior. Such a clear dependence seemed obvious to the editors of Deuteronomy, even though it might not be apparent what sin or transgression had caused the punishment.⁴¹ Some biblical scholars claim that “the very admission of personal guilt becomes the turning point towards hope in the future.”⁴² However, even if the traces of this traditional concept can be found in Lamentations, it seems that we can also see in it a clear break from the well-established theological view. It is interesting to observe that in Lamentations sin is attributed to different subjects, such as Zion, Jerusalem, “the daughters of my people,” or the ancestors. All of them seem rather abstract: perhaps not unreal, but certainly not specific. This impression is strengthened by Lamentations 3:39, where the editor mentions “a man,” or “a living man,” as the subject of sin, as if the sin (and the punishment for it) could be attributed to any living being. Although the book contains also confessions made in the first person (“we have transgressed and rebelled”—Lam 3:42; “we have sinned”—Lam 5:16), the individual songs express a certain tension, suggesting that, seen in the context of the disaster the Lamentations describes, the traditional view of Deuteronomistic theology was not without flaw.

This hypothesis also appears to be supported by the fact that, in the Book of Lamentations, it is difficult to find any specific characterization of the sin which had caused the disaster. The reader is provided only with general information on the issue: Lamentations 1:18 declares that Jerusalem rebelled against the words of the Lord, while Lamentations 4:13 mentions the sin of the priests. Apart from the allusions included in these verses, the nature of transgression to which the text refers finds no explanation; such details are absent even from the verses where the fault is confessed in the first person (“we have sinned”),

⁴⁰ See Dobbs - Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 29.

⁴¹ See Jannie Hunter, *Faces of a Lamenting City: The Development and Coherence of the Book of Lamentations* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris and Wien: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996), 73.

⁴² Jože Kravčev, “The Source of Hope in the Book of Lamentations,” *Vetus Testamentum* 42, no. 2 (1992): 227.

⁴³ Quoted after *The Revised Standard Version*.

⁴⁴ Quoted after *The Revised Standard Version*.

⁴⁵ Quoted after *The Revised Standard Version*.

⁴⁶ See Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 121.

or from Lamentations 4:6, which suggests that the sin of the “daughter of my people”⁴⁷ was greater than that of Sodom.

The reader’s uncertainty about the reasons which might explain the catastrophe is, perhaps, a reflection of the doubt cherished by the editors of the Book of Lamentations. On the one hand, they remembered the religious tradition expressed, e.g., in Deuteronomy 28⁴⁸ or in the teaching of the prophets who announced inevitable punishment of sin. On the other hand, the editors of Lamentations remembered also the theology of Zion, expressed, e.g., in the Psalms (Pss 46, 48, 87), which affirmed the inviolability of the Temple as the place chosen by the Lord. It is probably with that uncertainty that the evolution in the attitude of the editors began, their fearful doubt, gradually changing into detached observation of the facts, and finally into the open accusation: ‘The Lord has exceeded ... The Lord has abandoned himself to anger...’