

APPENDIX

LAMENTATIONS

THE position of Lamentations in the English Bible is due to the LXX. In the Hebrew Bible it is found in the Writings, as the third of the five *Megillot*, or Rolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther); the order within this small collection is not based on authorship, but on the order in which they are read in the Synagogue during the year at the major feasts and fasts. The English name is derived from the Vulgate. In Hebrew, the book is occasionally called *Qinot*, i.e. Lamentations, but normally *Ekah*, i.e. How—the first word of the 1st, 2nd and 4th lamentation.

The book is composed of five lamentations, or dirges, over the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar; quite understandably it is read in the Synagogue on the 9th of Ab, when a fast is held in remembrance of the destruction of both the first and the second temple.

Authorship.

The book is anonymous, and it is far from certain that all five poems are by the same writer. Both the LXX and Talmudic tradition ascribe it to Jeremiah, and this has been adopted by both the A.V. and R.V.; we should, however, do better to treat this tradition with reserve. Young sums up the position thus: "In the light of these arguments it seems most likely that Jeremiah did compose Lamentations. Of this, however, we cannot be certain, and it seems best to admit that we do not really know who the author was."¹

Our insistence on the anonymity of the book comes from no mere scholarly pedantry. It comes rather from the conviction that we show the Holy Spirit no respect, when we go beyond the indications of Scripture itself. There are some traditions, like that of the authorship of the Gospel according to Mark, which are so close to the time involved and so borne out by the evidence of the book, that we do not hesitate to accept them; but this does not apply to the traditions about the Old Testament. We are much safer and more reverent in accepting the anonymity imposed by the Holy Spirit Himself.

There is yet another reason. Whenever we make unprovable assertions about the Bible, however good our motive, we open

¹ Young, p. 334, see also Harrison, pp. 1069f.

the door wide to the equally unprovable assumptions of the modernist scholar. The fact that the conservative assumption is considered to be "edifying," and the modernist one the reverse, does not lift the former to a higher plane of legitimacy.

Hebrew Poetry.

Poetry achieves its ends by sublimeness of thought, by the felicitous use of words, by the striking nature of the word images it uses, by its use of metre and other rhythmic devices, and by certain technical devices like alliteration and rhyme.

The sublimeness of Hebrew poetic thought needs no stressing, but translation seldom does justice to the choice of words in the original. In addition, as reference to the R.V. mg. will sometimes, but not always, show, the translators have often been afraid of rendering the poetic images literally as being too strong or too striking for the Western ear. Metre Hebrew undoubtedly had, but doubt as to its exact nature, and still more the dissimilar structure of the two languages makes a metrical translation into English either an inadequate reflexion of the original or unsuited for use in public worship and private devotion. The Metrical Version of the Psalms is seldom good poetry and still seldomer a real picture of the Hebrew.

Hebrew uses a little alliteration and assonance, but never rhyme—the few apparent examples are mere accidents. Its main technical device is parallelism or thought rhythm, which echoes the thought in one metrical line in a second or even third line of the same metrical length (for the *qinah* metre see next section). The echo may be:

- (a) A complete repetition of the thought in other words:
But his delight is in the law of the LORD;
And in His law doth he meditate day and night. (Ps. 1: 2.)
- (b) A continuation of the thought:
And he shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water,
That bringeth forth its fruit in its season. (Ps. 1: 3.)
- (c) A combination of the literal and metaphorical:
Whose leaf also doth not wither,
And in whatsoever he doeth he shall prosper. (Ps. 1: 3.)
- (d) The opposite of the original thought (particularly common in Proverbs):
For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous:
But the way of the wicked shall perish. (Ps. 1: 6.)
- (e) Merely formal; the thought just runs on:
But now shall my head be lifted up
Above mine enemies round about me. (Ps. 27: 6.)

Even in the strictly poetical books we find occasional freedom in the metrical structure, lines being longer or shorter than we might have expected. This is a freedom that goes back to the Canaanite poetry of the fifteenth century B.C. discovered at Ras Shamra, and it persists throughout Biblical literature. In the prophetic books it is used sometimes with such freedom that there may even be doubt whether we are dealing with verse or rhythmic prose.¹

The Literary Form of Lamentations.

The first four poems are written in the *Qinah*, or dirge metre. In this the normal form of Hebrew poetic parallelism is abandoned. Instead of two or more lines of equal length, we have long lines divided into two unequal parts, the second being shorter than the first. Normally the first half has three beats, the second two. The second half continues and fills out the thought of the first half.

The metre is obscured in the A.V., but the R.V. sets out the long lines, without, however, indicating the break. Exigencies of translation more often than not mask the peculiarity of this metre, though once known it can often be recognized. The effect of the metre may be best seen in Moffatt's translation, though he sometimes achieves it only by considerable freedom in his renderings.

In addition, the first four contain an alphabetic acrostic arrangement. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and so chs. 1, 2, and 4 have 22 verses each, while ch. 3 has 66.

In chs. 1 and 2 each verse has three *Qinah* lines, the first line of each verse beginning with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. As translated by the R.V. the following verses have four lines each, 1: 1, 2, 7; 2: 2, 6, 17 (five), 19, but with the exception of 1: 7 and 2: 19 this is due only to faulty division of lines in the R.V. translation.

Ch. 4 resembles chs. 1 and 2, except that each verse has only two long lines. The four lines of ver. 22 are again due to the faulty division in the R.V.

Metrically ch. 3 is the most complicated. It falls into groups of three verses (indicated by the R.V.) in which *each* verse begins with the same letter of the alphabet. In spite of the greater number of verses, the third poem is obviously the same length as the first two.

Ch. 5 employs normal Hebrew parallelism and contains no acrostic. But since it too has 22 verses, one is tempted to wonder whether the author had intended at some time to transform it into an acrostic poem. Though it is not in the *Qinah* metre, a dirge-like note is struck by the assonances of

¹ For further details see HDB or ISBE, article Poetry, Hebrew.

the endings -u, -nu, -anu, -enu, -inu, -unu no less than 44 times.

It is the extremely artificial nature of the metre employed in these poems that has been one of the chief reasons for making many conservative scholars hesitant to accept the traditional authorship. We are not dealing here with the spontaneous outpourings of a broken heart, but with polished and self-conscious literature. Jeremiah was a great poet, but we find nothing in his prophetic poems to prepare us for Lamentations.

The First Lament.

The first poem deals with the desolation and misery of Jerusalem. The poet speaks in vers. 1-11b, and describes the condition of Jerusalem. Then in vers. 11c-16, Jerusalem herself speaks to Jehovah and recounts the measure of her misery. Her lament is interrupted by the poet with a descriptive verse (ver. 17). Finally Jerusalem closes with a prayer to God (vers. 18-22). As mostly in Lamentations, there is no real note of hope struck. She confesses (ver. 18ff) that her punishment is just; her real hope is that she may see her enemies handled as she has been.

It should be noted that this lament gives the impression of having been written some little time after the destruction of Jerusalem, see especially ver. 7, R.V. Jerusalem's lovers (vers. 2, 19) are the nations she relied on as allies against Babylon.

The Second Lament.

Here we have the undoubted work of an eye-witness of the siege; the lament was probably composed soon after the fall of the city. Its main theme is Jehovah's anger with His people.

In vers. 1-10 we have the casting off by God of people, land and sanctuary. In ver. 9 the A.V., "the law is no more," seems to be more correct than the R.V., though its force might easily be misunderstood. The three groups of leaders, kings and princes, priests, prophets, are being referred to. It is the priestly guidance of life that has come to an end with the destruction of the temple.

In vers. 11-17 he laments the punishment of Jerusalem and describes the callousness of the neighbouring nations. It is not clear whether ver. 11ff look back to the horrors of the siege, or whether they describe the misery of the survivors after the leading citizens had been deported.

In ver. 18f Zion is called to give herself to prayer, and vers. 20ff are her response. Though the tenses in ver. 20 are

future, the questions are rhetorical and refer to what had already happened.

The Third Lament.

Though this poem occasionally uses the first person plural, as a whole it is written in the first person singular. It is far from certain whether we have here a description of the author's own experiences, or whether a representative Israelite or even personified Jerusalem is made to speak. On balance the second or third view seems the more probable.

The first twenty verses are a description of personal sufferings. Then the speaker calls to mind that running through all his sufferings there had been the grace of God; otherwise he would have been completely destroyed. This in turn creates hope for the future. So he calls for penitence (vers. 40-54). This leads to new hope (ver. 55ff) and a call to God for vengeance on his enemies (vers. 58-66). It is striking that here, too, the only hope open seems to be rather that his enemies should suffer as he has, than that he should be restored to his old estate.

This lament stands out in sharp contrast with the rest of the book. Were it elsewhere, *e.g.* among the Psalms, few would think of associating it with the fall of Jerusalem. It is not so much the physical misery of the siege and the shame of captivity and exile that weigh on the poet, as the spiritual misery of being separated from God by a sense of guilt and the destruction of the sanctuary. In many ways it is reminiscent of portions of the book of Job.

The Fourth Lament.

In most respects this poem stands in close relationship to the second. Here, too, there are clear reminiscences of the siege. Its theme is the contrast between Zion past and present.

The first eleven verses present the contrast itself. In ver. 6 the A.V. has missed the point. It is not the punishment of Jerusalem and of Sodom that are being compared, but their iniquity. In ver. 7 the R.V. is probably correct in rendering "nobles" rather than "Nazirites."

The change in Zion's fortunes is then attributed to the sins of the priests and prophets (vers. 12-16) which left no hope of a refuge once the storm broke (vers. 17-20). The "nation that could not save" (ver. 17) is, of course, Egypt. The poet then looks forward to a similar reversal of fate that will come to Zion's foes as personified by Edom (ver. 21ff).

The Fifth Lament.

Fittingly the book closes with an appeal to Jehovah. In the first eighteen verses the poet describes the afflictions of

Jehovah's people, and then ends with the abiding power of God. The closing verse should be rendered as in the R.V. margin:

Unless thou hast utterly rejected us
And art very wroth against us.

It is the note of hope, but of subdued hope. To avoid ending the reading of the book on even a qualified minor key, the Synagogue has ver. 21 repeated after ver. 22. Since the generation of the destruction could not plead personal innocence, it looks as though ver. 7 implies a date some time on in the exile for this the last of the poems.

The Messianic Interpretation.

Certain passages are frequently used with reference to the Passion of our Lord. The most obvious are 1: 12 and certain expressions in ch. 3. As long as this is done reverently and knowingly, few would cavil at it. The reason why this is possible is instructive.

Our Lord is the Second Man (I Cor. 15: 47). The sufferings of the righteous before Him were but foreshadowings of His sufferings, and the punishment of sin was a foreshadowing of what He would have to bear when He took our place as our substitute. It is therefore entirely to be expected that in this book of the suffering for sin, there would be the frequent phrase that would remind the loving heart of a much deeper suffering.

The Purpose of Lamentations.

One fallacy that is widely held is that inspiration is a question merely of authorship. For those who held it, the "fact" of Jeremiah's authorship of Lamentations was sufficient justification for its being in the Bible. But the reason why any particular book is included in the Canon of Scripture must be deeper than that.

The Bible sets out to give us every facet of the impact of God's revelation on man. There is no aspect of human life, once it has been brought into the sphere of the operation of God's Spirit, that is not illumined by some book of the Bible.

Grief, great and crushing, is an unavoidable part of human life. Even in the new covenant it can come, and even there it can come as the result of sin, one's own or another's. To one who is passing through such an experience, who feels that the sun can never shine again as it once did, Lamentations may speak its word of comfort in ways that cannot be grasped by those who have not gone down into the vale of grief.