CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RETURN TO LAMENT IN LAMENTATIONS 3

8.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I have tried to demonstrate that the movement praise-lament or the return to lament after praise can also be found in Jer 20:7–18. Here I try to build on that by further exploring another related text outside the Psalms—Lamentations 3. I chose Lamentations 3 because it is the closest to the individual lament psalms among the five chapters in Lamentations. Though consisting of different genres, \(^1\) the individual lament dominates Lamentations 3. \(^2\) Westermann observes that the first section (1–25) follows the “normal pattern for the genre of the personal lament”. \(^3\) By “normal pattern” he means a movement from lament to a more hopeful and confident mood. He explains that although the lament does not contain the usual invocation at the beginning (1), it nonetheless moves from an “accusation against God” (2–17a), “personal complaint” (17b–19), to an “avowal of confidence” (20–25). \(^4\) More importantly for the purpose of this study, Lamentations 3 not only contains a movement from despair to hope (1–24), it also contains a return to lament (42ff).

Unfortunately, as in the case of the psalms we have examined including the passage in Jeremiah, most scholars do not see this return to lament after praise. Thus, although Westermann noted the movement from despair to hope in the first part of the poem, he did not account

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\(^1\) Lamentations 3 is a combination of various genres. Paul R. House, *Lamentations* (vol. 23B; WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 404, observes: “Aspects of communal lament, individual lament, wisdom-based psalmic observations, and instructions like those found in Ps 37 and 73 are all in evidence”.


\(^4\) Westermann, *Die Klagelieder*, 143, et *Lamentations*, 169. He sees the last three verses of the chapter (vv. 64–66) as a “[fragmentary] conclusion” to the individual lament.
for the occurrence of the communal lament (42–47) after the hymnic affirmations in vv. 22–24. As can be observed above, his understanding of lament is limited by the form-critical view of the movement lament-praise. The focus is on the change of mood from lament to hope, which is often explained in terms of Begrich’s salvation oracle theory.

Incidentally, Lamentations 3 occupies a prominent place in Begrich’s thesis. Begrich believes that in Lam 3:57b the “wesentliches Moment” of the giving of the oracle of salvation is testified. But as in his application of his theory in Psalm 35:3, the problem with Begrich’s approach is that he does not consider the context of the whole of Lamentations 3. Even more problematic, the text is one-sidedly viewed through the lens of the form-critical framework which sees only a one-way movement from lament to praise. The sole emphasis lies on the discovery of the element of certainty in the text, ignoring the element of ‘uncertainty’ which is at the heart of Lamentations 3.

Lamentations 3 has often been viewed as the ‘heart’ of the book of Lamentations not only because of its position in the centre of the

5 Begrich, “Das priesterliche Heilsorakel”, 83. In their respective analyses of Lam 3:57b Kraus, Rudolph, Westermann, and more recently Knut Heim, follow Begrich’s thesis. Kraus, Klagegedichte (Threni) (vol. 20; 2nd ed; BKAT; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 17, believes that “Wenn der einzelne Beter in seiner Not zu Jahwe schrie und ihn um sein Einschreiten bat, dann durfte er den Zuspruch ‘Fürchte dich nicht!’ vernehmen”. Both Rudolph and Westermann appeal to the article by Begrich in their explanation of v. 57, which they believe contains an oracle of salvation (Wilhelm Rudolph, Das Buch Ruth. Das Hohe Lied. Die Klagegedichte. Die Klagegedichte [vol. 27 (1–3); KAT; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1962], 243; Westermann, Lamentations, 186). Knut M. Heim, “The Personification of Jerusalem and the Drama of Her Bereavement in Lamentations”, in Zion, City of Our God (ed. Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge U.K.: Eerdmans, 1999), 163, strongly endorses this interpretation. Following the form-critical view of a movement from lament to praise, he comments concerning the “fear not” in Lam 3:57: “the significance of this phrase, the only divine utterance in Lamentations, should not be underestimated. ‘Fear not!’ is the typical opening of the so-called ‘salvation oracle’ in psalms of lament”. He argues that Lamentations 3 is very much like the psalms of lament with its movement towards praise. He understands vv. 22–23 as a hymnic praise. Contrary to many who do not see any response from God in the book as a whole, he sees in v. 57 an ‘oracle of salvation’, which, even though only a very small part, represents the “heart” of the whole book of Lamentations. He writes: “Here we are at the heart of the book of Lamentations. The author/compiler’s purpose is to encourage his fellow citizens, and he achieves his aim magnificently by relating his own experience of a divine oracle in the traditional language of his people’s accepted religious lore” (ibid., 163–4).

6 Writing poetically C. W. Eduard Naegelsbach, “The Lamentations of Jeremiah”, in Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures. Isaiah to Lamentations (vol. 6; ed. John Peter Lange; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1960), 4, describes Lamentations 3 as follows: “As the pyramid of Mont Blanc, seen at sunset from Chamouny, its summit gleaming