The aim of this essay is to sketch the development of the Hebrew poetic tradition of writing dirges lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, as it developed from the Bible onward. Once I have established the basic outlines of this tradition, I proceed to compare it with another (related) Jewish poetic tradition—that represented by poems written in the Jewish Palestinian Aramaic dialect, during the Late Antique period. For our present purposes, the goal of such a comparison is to enable us to properly situate the JPA material within the Late Antique Palestinian Jewish literary-cultural complex.

1. The Bible and its Epigones

The transition from biblical to post-biblical poetry is marked by the relegation of parallelismus membrorum from the status of major poetic organizational principle to that of subsidiary compositional device. Parallelism as such never really disappears from Hebrew poetry (in fact, parallelism in the broad sense is rightly thought of as the very heart and soul of poetic thought—cf. Jakobson 1966, 399–429), but beginning with the Late Antique period, i.e., with the advent of piyyut, it is unambiguously replaced by a triad of poetic organizational devices: acrostic, meter, and rhyme. These are complementary, in the sense that they govern the beginning, middle, and end of the poetic line, respectively. They were not all introduced at the same time: acrostic

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1 I would like to thank Prof. Raymond Scheindlin and Prof. Seth Schwartz, both of JTSA, for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 This poetry is sometimes referred to as ‘Targum poetry’, on account of the fact that it may be associated with the reading of the Targum. An illuminating discussion of the import of this association may be found in Leonhard 2006, 353–361. The targumic lecture, however, is not the only possible Sitz im Leben for Palestinian Aramaic poems, as will hopefully become clear from this essay. In view of this fact, a more neutral, objectively descriptive term such as ‘JPA poetry’ is called for here.
and meter, as obligatory devices, are attested before rhyme. And they do not always appear together in one poem, even at the peak of the development of Classical piyyut. However, they collectively yield the possibility of strophic composition, which is almost entirely absent in the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, while being extensively developed, sometimes to degrees of remarkable complexity, in the Classical piyyut tradition.

The most obvious exception to the claim of a lack of strophic organization in the poetry of the biblical period is the Book of Lamentations. And since we are fortunate enough to have hints of the development of the eikha-dirge within the Bible itself, Lamentations can be viewed as (typologically) adumbrating, albeit faintly, the formal changes that came to revolutionize Hebrew poetry with the emergence of piyyut. Once each in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, we find poetic pericopes beginning with הַיְּשָׁרֵה and lamenting the fate of a city. Isa 1:21ff bewails the moral corruption that has befallen Jerusalem (Figure 1). Jer 48:17ff proposes that a dirge be taken up over the Moabite city Dibon (Figure 2). It would appear on the basis of these cases that a pre-exilic poetic tradition existed whereby the tragic fate of a city, Israelite or otherwise, could be described in a lamentation poem beginning with הַיְּשָׁרֵה (cf. also Isa 14:4ff and Ezek 26:17–18). Neither Isaiah’s nor Jeremiah’s lament shows signs of having either a fixed number of lines, or a strophic structure. In the next stage of development, we note that three of the dirges in Lamentations, all of which is devoted to the fall of Jerusalem, open with a הַיְּשָׁרֵה-line. In the case of Lamentations 1, 2, and 4, the acrostic principle has been introduced, the alef requirement being satisfied (and perhaps originally suggested) by the opening word (Figure 3). Lamentations 1 and 2 employ a straight alphabetic acrostic whereby every fourth line opens with a

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3 In scholarship, the piyyut phenomenon in Palestine is usually divided into two phases: the pre-Classical and the Classical. The former is characterized by the anonymity of the poets, as well as by the absence of both rhyme and complex strophic composition. The latter is characterized by the opposite features: the attribution of the compositions to poets known by name (mostly on the basis of name acrostics), as well as the extensive employment of rhyme and a variety of different strophe-types. The two periods are discussed in extenso in what is effectively the only handbook on the subject: Fleischer 1975, 7–275.

4 In the present context, ‘stages of development’ are defined formally—i.e., as items in a series whose internal relationship is determined by judgments about structural complexity. It is also probably true, however, that in this case the formal judgment reflects actual chronology (regardless of whether or not one accepts the traditional attribution of Lamentations to Jeremiah).