THE MEANING OF THE PARALLEL ACROSTICS IN LAMENTATIONS

In the course of time there have been different views about the meaning of the alphabetic acrostics in Lamentations. Some exegetes have suspected a magical power behind the letters. Others have supposed that the acrostic form was used as a pedagogic device by which children were taught the alphabet. Some have suggested that the alphabetic acrostic served as an aide-mémoire and have coupled this view with a cultic estimate of the book.¹ These explanations have not met with much approval and it is not difficult to see why. In view of its content Lamentations is not very suitable for use in school, and as a mnemonic aid, four alphabetic acrostics together—often with the same words or verbs at the beginning of strophes—would have been confusing.² The explanation of the use of the alphabetic acrostics widely accepted nowadays is that it symbolized a sense of completeness. The alphabet is the embodiment of totality and plenitude which is expressed in the saying from Aleph to Taw. Hence it is a literary form which corresponds to the completeness of grief which is expressed in the poems.³

Recently, C. Westermann questioned this view and chose an aesthetical explanation. According to him, five totalities together represent less totality than one alone: ‘Die Erklärung als Ganzheit ‘von A bis Z’ ist schwierig, weil dann fünf verschiedene Ganzheiten beim gleichen Gegenstand nebeneinanderstehen. Die ästhetische Erklärung reicht aus: Diese Gestaltung der Dichtung wurde als kunstvoll empfunden’.⁴ However, this view has its own difficulty: in the case of Lamentations the goal of literary beauty is hardly in accordance with its content and with the circumstances in which the poems came into being.⁵

Statements such as “artificial” (M. Löhr) or “aesthetic” (C. Westermann) express subjective appreciations. But in my opinion the poets had something else in mind. They applied the literary form of parallel acrostics as a visualisation of the responsive coherence between the (strophes of the) poems. The strophes—marked by the same letters of the alphabet—form song responsions, that is to say: in one way or another the identical letter strophes form on the same (letter) level external parallelisms, identical, additional or antithetical, in language and content. I have already pointed out this phenomenon in my essays on the literary structure

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of Lamentations, but only very briefly. After the completion of my commentary I am able to illustrate these song responsions in more detail. I will give some examples.

Let us start with the coherence between the a-strophes and include v 1. In i 1 Lady Jerusalem is depicted as a widow (kəlmən). It is well known that widowhood and jewellery are incompatible (cf. Isa. lx 3; Judith viii 5), a fact which is one of the links with ii 1: the Lord has taken away the jewel of Israel, i.e., the temple of Jerusalem. The daughter of Zion has become like a widow because the Lord—“her husband”—in dark anger has withdrawn his presence from Zion.

The link with iii 1 lies in the darkness which accompanies YHWH’s Day of Judgement, because the gbr complains that the Lord has driven him in darkness and no light, which is a quotation of Amos’ description of that day of the Lord (Amos v 18). The gbr, the pious man of iii 1—who is one of the bny sywn (iv 2)—is an inhabitant of Jerusalem; cf. iii 51. The misery of Lady Jerusalem—depicted in i 1—is the same misery that he is facing. A part of his misery is the destruction of the temple, depicted in ii 1, but also in iv 1. It is caused by the anger of the Lord (cf. Mic. iii 14; Lam. iv 11), and the dimness of the gold of the temple on Zion (iv 1) is caused by the darkness of his anger (ii 1).

Lam. v 1 shows a strong link with i 1: the disgrace which is complained about includes the disgrace of Lady Jerusalem, who has become like a widow: kəlmən (i 1) // hrπtnw (v 1). It also includes the misery of the pious man of iii 1 and the destruction of Zion.

Something about the coherence of the b-strophes will now be considered. i 2 points at the tears of Lady Jerusalem because of the betrayal by her former neighbours who have become her enemies. The effect of their hostile activity is depicted in ii 2 as an act of YHWH, see ii 7. The outcome is the destruction of the strongholds and the kingdom of Judah. This breakdown is contrasted with the building of a prison wall around the pious man (the gbr of iii 1): hrš contra bnk. There are clear connections with iii 4, the beginning of the b-strophe of the third song. ii 2 speaks of the breakdown of the cities and iii 4 speaks of the breakdown of one of their inhabitants, the pious man. As a consequence iv 2 speaks of the children of Zion as broken potsherds. The “night” of Lady Jerusalem corresponds with the dark places in which the gbr has been driven by YHWH. The breakdown of the kingdom and its leaders leaves the popula-