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Renkema, Johan.
Lamentations

Historical Commentary on the Old Testament

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This newly translated (from the Dutch) commentary is a welcome addition to the Historical Commentary on the Old Testament series. The book begins with a relatively brief introduction (pp. 33-71) that discusses issues of title, canon, literary structure, authorship, date, place of origin, and theology. Renkema includes a separate section where he outlines his approach to method (pp. 72-79), much of which will be familiar to those who have read his previously published essays and articles on Lamentations. The remainder of the commentary is divided into five sections corresponding to the five chapters, or poems, of the book. Renkema's discussion of each poem follows a set pattern: translation, literary structure, a nontechnical overview of the poem designed for a general audience, and, finally, a highly detailed "Scholarly Exposition" of the poem itself.

Much of the introductory materials adheres to mainstream scholarship and is rooted in traditional historical-critical approaches, as one would expect in this commentary series. After brief comments on the book's title and its canonical status, Renkema turns to what is perhaps the most distinctive part of his introduction—the section entitled "Literary Structure." It is here that he discusses the unity and genre of Lamentations. Renkema states that the book is "no doubt . . . a written creation, a well considered compositional unity" (p. 44). Renkema is certainly not the only scholar who argues for the unity of Lamentations, although, among contemporary scholars, one is hard pressed to find more than a handful. According to Renkema, it is the alphabetic character of the five poems (chapters 1 through 4 being acrostics and chapter 5 having 22 verses) that argues for the book's unity. Each strophe of a poem is related to the corresponding strophes in all the other poems. The *alef*-strophe in chapters 1 through 4 and the first verse of chapter 5, for example, are linked at the semantic level across the entire book. This is true for the *bet*-strophe, the *gimel*-strophe, and so on. These external parallelisms afford "a clear literary indication for the mutually respondent character of the songs" (p. 50), which in turn suggests, at least to Renkema, that these song responses make "quite evident" the unity of Lamentations (p. 76). If Lamentations is a unified literary production, what may one say

about the genre? As one might expect, Renkema rejects previous attempts to identify the genre of the separate poems and suggests that the book taken as a whole represents a wholly "unique literary creation" and "a new mode of expression" (p.41). Lamentations is, in other words, *sui generis*.

In Renkema's discussion of authorship, date, and place of origin, he attributes the book to the Temple singers who remained behind in Jerusalem after its destruction in 587 B.C.E. The Temple singers sought to fill the leadership vacuum brought about by Jerusalem's fall and created the poems in Lamentations at some point not long after 587 B.C.E. as "a new way of drawing YHWH's attention to their affliction, a new way of praying and believing" (p. 45).

The section entitled "Method" includes a brief overview of Renkema's exegetical approach to Lamentations. Those familiar with the method of interpretation of classical Hebrew and Ugaritic poetry pioneered by the Kampen School will find few surprises. The emphasis is on the structural analysis of the text, which segments the poem into a series of interrelated divisions that include, among others, canticles and cantos. As noted above, Renkema places much significance on external parallelism in his exegesis, so he includes a discussion of inclusions and responses. Inclusions, according to Renkema, are "external parallelism at the opposing level within a literary unit" and responses are external parallelisms that operate "at the same level within a literary unit" (p. 75). In the exegetical part of his commentary, Renkema identifies both inclusions and responses for every poem at the beginning of his discussion of each canticle.

The exegetical portion of the commentary is over five hundred pages in length and, as such, offers an amazing amount of detailed exegesis for each poetic line. Renkema's translations, based on the Masoretic text of Leningrad Codex B 19^A, do not include textual notations. He does address, however, textual issues within the larger discussion of individual poetic lines. For the most part, Renkema adheres to the MT and rarely seeks to make any type of emendation. Renkema also provides the reader with a one-page schematic overview of the literary structure of each poem that serves as the organizing principle for his detailed exegesis. Much could be said regarding Renkema's exegetical work, both positively and negatively, but I will restrict myself to comments on one significant issue basic to his work throughout the commentary.

Song responses, which are the form of external parallelism that connect corresponding strophes and unify the five poems, figure prominently throughout the commentary. Renkema uses them to argue for the unity of Lamentations, to clarify difficult passages, and to solve perplexing textual problems. They are, in other words, the basis of many of Renkema's exegetical decisions. Renkema illustrates his concept of song responses early in the commentary by exploring the connections among the first strophes of each of the 4

acrostic poems and the first verse of chapter 5. If we examine only his attempts to link the first verses of each poem, however, we begin to encounter difficulties.

Lam 1:1 and 2:1 are linked, according to Renkema, through the motif of jewelry. In speaking of Lam 1:1, Renkema comments that it is "well known" that "widowhood and jewelry are incompatible" (p. 39). He goes on to note that Lam 2:1 speaks of God taking away "the jewel of Jerusalem" (p. 39). The "jewel" in this instance, according to Renkema, is the Temple in Jerusalem. The connection between these two verses then is "evident" - "a widow wore no adornment . . . YHWH himself has made Israel into a widow and removed her adornment from her" (p. 219). These connections abound with problems, the most obvious being that in neither verse is mention made of jewelry. Lam 1:1 focuses on Jerusalem as widow and Lam 2:1 speaks of Jerusalem's "splendor" being cast down from heaven. For this connection to work, the reader would need to link the "splendor" of Lam 2:1 with jewelry and the widowhood of Jerusalem in Lam 1:1 with a lack of jewelry. The connection seems rather forced. A similar connection is made to Lam 4:1, although in this case the focus is on the temple in Jerusalem. The jewelry of Lam 1:1 and 2:1 that Jerusalem no longer possesses is the temple. When mention is made of "gold" and "sacred stones" in Lam 4:1, according to Renkema, this refers to the temple. A link is now made with all three strophes. That is to say, Lam 1:1, 2:1, and 4:1 refer to the loss of Jerusalem's temple. Even if one were to grant the possibility that Lam 2:1 and 4:1 point to the loss of the temple, it is difficult to see the connection with Lam 1:1 unless one resorts to circular reasoning. That is to say, one could argue that Lam 1:1, 2:1, and 4:1 are song responses and, therefore, are connected at the semantic level. Since Lam 2:1 and 4:1 refer to Jerusalem's temple, then Lam 1:1 must also refer to the temple. Furthermore, since Lam 1:1, 2:1, and 4:1 all refer to the temple, they must be song responses, as they are all connected at the semantic level. The problem with this sort of reasoning is obvious. The attempts to link 1:1; 3:1; and 5:1 are equally specious. One could follow Renkema's discussion of each subsequent strophe with similar results. The idea that there are external parallelisms that connect strophes across the different poems in Lamentations is intriguing. Renkema, however, attempts too much in linking all corresponding strophes in this way. Without proven, or at least probable, links among the various song responses, it becomes problematic to use them to solve textual problems, clarify difficult passages, or, more importantly, posit the unity of the book as a whole.

A few minor criticisms are in order. Renkema cites a large number of biblical passages from throughout the Hebrew Bible and often refers to many other biblical commentators, but there are no indices to help the reader find these references. There are numerous typographical errors scattered throughout the commentary (for example "alfabetic acrostics," p. 11; "exemples," p. 39; "to endures," p. 198), as well as several misspellings (for example, "vein" for "vain," p. 156; "Wisemann" for "Weismann," p. 163; "raises" for "razes," p. 214).

Despite the problems identified in this review, Renkema's commentary is filled with interesting and helpful insights into the Book of Lamentations and will be a useful tool for all interested in the exegesis of these five fascinating poems.