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Lamentations



Berlin, Adele

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Single-volume commentaries on the book of Lamentations have been rare. Westminster's Old Testament Library commentary series has existed for about forty years without a volume on Lamentations. While no work on Lamentations could be said to be worth such a wait, this brilliant commentary by Adele Berlin more than fills the void and should become the foundation for all work on Lamentations for years to come. In a day when biblical commentaries seem to be evaluated by weight, and biblical books of a length similar to Lamentations are generating commentaries in excess of 500 pages, the economy and elegance of Berlin's work cry out like a voice in the wilderness.

Following a thorough bibliography, Berlin addresses general issues involved in the interpretation of the book of Lamentations in a tightly written thirty-seven-page introduction. Along with expected subjects, such as date, authorship, purpose, features of Hebrew poetry, and ancient Near Eastern parallels, Berlin also addresses "Mourning as a Religious Concept" and "The Theology of Destruction and Exile." She identifies "*qinah* meter" as the defining poetic feature of Lamentations, while not arguing for a "countable sense" of meter in Hebrew poetry (2). She describes a "sublime literary touch" in the use of the "formal and rigid" acrostic structure in poems lamenting the breakdown of order and structure in the world (4–5). Berlin will give careful attention to the speaking voices

present in the poems of Lamentations. Five different speaking voices offer five different perspectives on the destruction of Jerusalem in the five chapters of Lamentations. The section on “Gender and Suffering” is somewhat defensive in nature. Berlin appears to be responding to feminist criticism of the Bible’s overuse of metaphors of abuse of women. She fails to see how the repeated portrayal of God as one who abuses and shames women, and the unchallenged assumption that the women always deserve it, legitimate the abuse of women in modern religious contexts. Berlin is correct that feminist arguments have sometimes missed other aspects of the text, such as the significance of positive, maternal imagery and the quantity of masculine suffering, but this issue needs more careful consideration than her easy dismissal offers.

The introduction offers two excurses: “*Bat-šiyôn*, the Personified Zion” and “Jerusalem’s Residents: A Sociological Profile.” Berlin understands the former as an “appositional genitive” (12). In light of this grammatical conclusion, she will use the translation “Dear Zion.” The latter excursus contains a thorough list of all the terms used to designate the various inhabitants of Jerusalem, a list that Berlin notes is “surprisingly diverse” (15).

The discussion of “The Theology of Destruction and Exile” describes two significant paradigms for understanding this issue: “the paradigm of purity” and the “political paradigm.” These two theological frameworks reflect the thinking of the Priestly source and Deuteronomy, respectively. Berlin finds it natural that these two paradigms are “fused” in the prophetic tradition and Lamentations so that exile is seen as “the ultimate punishment for the most serious sins” (22). Thus, her keen observation is that “[t]he burden of Lamentations is not to question why this happened, but to give expression to the fact that it did” (18), an idea that figures prominently throughout this commentary. Berlin identifies Lamentations as a “Jerusalem lament,” a literary type that also describes Ps 137. She accepts a close relationship between Lamentations and the Sumerian city laments, without a need to describe the nature of the literary dependence between these cultural traditions with speculative precision. Berlin refuses either to accept or deny Jeremian authorship, preferring a careful description of the implied authors of the poems. She is partial to Nancy C. Lee’s suggestion that there are two implied authors, Zion and an unnamed prophet. The latter, implied author may be understood as Jeremiah, without this understanding having any bearing on whether the historical Jeremiah was the actual author of the book. Finally, Berlin prefers a date of composition for Lamentations in the late exilic period. She avoids any firm conclusion about an original purpose of the book in favor of the view that “the book ultimately gained a liturgical place in the commemoration of the Second Temple” (36).

The five sections of this commentary corresponding to the five chapters of Lamentations each begin with a full presentation of Berlin's translation and extensive notes explaining text-critical issues and points of difficulty in the translation. The translations are nicely laid out according to the structure of the poetry, with emphasis on the acrostic design. The notes are typically thorough and explain the translation choices clearly, though readers may quibble with some of these choices. For example, she chooses to translate the two occurrences of *rabbātī* in 1:1 differently, yielding

Alas, she sits alone,
the city once **thronged** with people,
she has become like a widow.
Noble among the nations,
princess among provinces;
she has become a forced laborer.

This choice obscures a significant verbal repetition from the view of English readers, while "great with people" and "great among the nations" would appear to be adequate translations that keep this literary device in full view. More difficult to understand is Berlin's choice to omit direct translation of several negative particles in chapter 2. She admits that the Hebrew has a stronger negative tone, while her English translation is "less stark" (67), but offers no explanation as to why she made this choice.

Berlin's comments on each chapter are careful and detailed. Lamentations focuses on the personification of Zion and the images of feminine suffering that illustrate its plight. It ends with the wish for God to turn the divine, destructive anger onto the enemies of Israel, but Berlin aptly observes that the poem ends with this wish unfulfilled. Lamentations 1 uses "a kaleidoscope of images" (47) to portray Israel's suffering. Both the sin and punishment of Jerusalem carry sexual connotations and are, thus, closely matched. The image of the *niddā* in 1:17 receives significant attention. Berlin translates this term as "menstruating woman," so that it is not only an image of sexuality but also of impurity. In Lam 2, the focus shifts "from shame ... to anger," "from victim ... to perpetrator" (67), and from Jerusalem to God. Berlin skillfully demonstrates the sense of movement and process in this chapter. The movement is from heaven to earth, and the process is the "unbuilding" of Jerusalem, beginning with the temple. Berlin argues that because Lam 2 lacks some of the typical elements of a communal lament (e.g., praise or petition), it is not an actual prayer but "a rhetorical device through which the poet again expresses his anger, this time using the mouth of Jerusalem as his vehicle" (77).

Berlin describes the self-identified *geber*, who speaks in Lam 3 as "the personified voice of the exile" (84). The first twenty-one verses are "a poetic representation of the forced

march into exile” (86). The response to this presentation, in 3:22–39, is a theodicy reminiscent of the Israelite wisdom tradition. Berlin identifies 3:40–44 as “the theological and poetic turning point” (95), at which the poet confronts the conclusion that “there is no direct relationship between repentance and forgiveness” (96). The painful question is whether God will respond to repentance with comforting presence or remain hidden. Lamentations 4 turns to look at the siege of Jerusalem. Berlin pays careful attention to the literary detail used to depict the physical suffering of the people (e.g., the use of color). Lamentations 4:13–15 returns to the purity paradigm to explain the cause of this suffering and destruction. As in all commentaries, the discussion becomes more sparse toward the end. Issues taken up in earlier chapters recur in later ones, but the discussion is not repeated. This is perfectly acceptable, but one test of a helpful commentary ought to be its provision of careful references back to the fuller discussions in earlier sections, since most users of a commentary do not read it straight through. Some of this assistance is present in this book, but it is uneven. When impurity is raised as a major issue in the commentary on 4:13–15 (110), a parenthetical note points the reader back to the discussion in the introduction, with no page number, but not to the related discussion in the commentary on 1:17 (58–59).

Lamentations 5 presents the “social and economic breakdown of the country” (119, 122) in the aftermath of the siege. Berlin weighs some of the literary puzzles of this chapter. It has twenty-two verses, but is not an acrostic. Its verses are shorter and the lines more carefully balanced in terms of parallelism. She evaluates the relationship of this final chapter to the preceding four as “uncertain,” unwilling to accept or reject the standard identification of the final chapter as a “coda.” Finally, she notes that Jewish tradition follows a pattern in public reading of repeating the more positive penultimate verse at the end when the final verse is more negative. This is certainly the case with Lam 5:21–22, as it is at the end of Isaiah, Malachi, and Ecclesiastes.

This commentary provides a fresh reading of Lamentations. As one might expect, based upon Berlin’s earlier scholarly work, careful attention to literary artistry and its relationship to the meaning of the text is the primary focus of attention. Nevertheless, her careful work on issues more historical in nature makes this commentary a thorough introduction to Lamentations and an indispensable resource for all students and teachers of the Bible.