TWO RECURRING MOTIFS IN THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS AND THEIR LATER MIDRASHIC INTERPRETATION [1]

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Introduction

One of the most difficult challenges faced by the interpreters of biblical and postbiblical literature is posed by the Book of Lamentations. Themes such as atrocity, the discourse stemming from mourning and grief, mass murder and the cultural 'silence' that follows it, the role of history and its capacity to give proper answers in due time, always draw attention to the general inadequacies of language. Non-analytic reading seems pointless because of its sightedness; and the more writers brood on such subjects, the more 'interpretation' justifies its name. Dryden describes the need for a deeper approach: "For the most precious pearls one has to dive in the depths of the ocean". The Book of Lamentations, like almost all the history of literature, defeats attempts of blunt-styled reading. Hermeneutics (namely a selective and creative reading) discloses the evilness of evil and painfulness of pain, as conveyed in bodies of symbolic items, and the biblical text provides the place where senses are rediscovered. It is, one might say, a 'sympathetic magical proceeding' through which meanings are undone by means of an accurate understanding. Interpretation consists of formulae which wait for the trained user to set them in motion. But one can scarcely imagine a single hermeneutised 'thread' which unravels only by spotting it quickly. There are no single solutions to questions on the nature of poetical work, but rather an entire network of probable answers, all endowed with interpretative, i.e. relative truth. Form and message in the Book of Lamentations benefit of a profound figurative language and of a deeply troped system of signs, which allow the reader to break through the bulwark of

a single, common, ordinary explanation and to reach the realm of multiple senses.

Ancient writers no more than their successors, were denied the possibility of transcribing directly and unaffectedly the authentic cry of human pain in the purity of its original expression [Mintz, 1982, 1]. They shared a certain sense of 'expressional impossibility' (Harold Bloom's *dictum*) in facing the harsh experience, and eventually they ended descriptions in the pathetic key of the Sumerian poet two millennia before the Common Era who cried "There are no words". Nevertheless, the author(s) of the Book of Lamentations, fifteen hundred years later, stood before an unprecedented event equipped with and burdened with a long-used traditions of communal laments and dirges. It is a mistake to consider, in terms of accurate description of the events, the poetical approach of historical catastrophe as insufficient. There are so many signs certifying the authorial efforts to find a new way to express the 'inexpressible' and poetical devices were set in to this purpose. A plain text as Thykydides' or Herodotus' may satisfy the historian, but does not fulfil the expectances of a aesthete. New technical devices were laboured and schemed in order to 'squeeze' from the language all its compositional capacities, in terms of meaning. An outrage of human dimensions was deemed to be cosmic and therefore no attempt towards a successful literary representation had to be spared. What Harold Bloom coined (explicitly enough) as 'strong' or 'conclusive' topics are evident throughout the biblical text: literary devices through which characteristics of an event are effectively brought out in the boldest relief.

We would not reject neat and tidy solutions like Norman Gottwald's [Gottwald, 1954] or Bertil Albrektson's [Albrektson, 1963]. Both had found a single 'key' to the theology of Lamentations: the former in the tension between deutoronomic faith and the tragic facts of history and the latter in seeing Lamentations as a document designed to lead Israel back to faith in a *person* rather than a *place*. Albrektson challenged Gottwald's interpretation by going directly to the heart of his thesis and asking whether there had ever existed a 'tension' between faith and lived history and he stated that Zion, as a symbolic representation of what Israel means in its contemporaneity, had been closely linked to Israel's faith. Thus, when Zion fell, so did the belief in God. A synthesis of the two ideas was later picked up by P. Ackroyd in his broader attempt to articulate a "theology of the Exile" [see Ackroyd, 1968]. The problem of these hypotheses is that both put forward the conviction, *a priori*, that a *single* theological focal point can not only be found in this collection of laments over Jerusalem, but also that such a postulated focal point might then serve as the major theological trust of the book. This kind of a methodological

approach is often suspect in works wherein authorship, time, and place of composition are generally recognized and accepted; it is still more so in a diffuse compilations of poetic compositions like the "books" of Psalms and Lamentations [Moore, 1983, 536]. It is safer to say that deuteronomic and Zion traditions serve as contributing traditional sources for the development of the theology articulated in Lamentations, and to focus on either of these, or even on some synthesis between the two, eventually proves inadequate.

·To posit a single theological focus would most likely imply that the poet(s) responsible for the collection made a deliberate attempt to go beyond the raw facts, to develop a theological treatise. Such an attitude tends, in the final analysis, to reduce and constrict the variegated impact of Lamentations' broad theological thrust, and also to force the so-called 'secondary' themes out of the picture. We doubt that the author(s) methodically planned to employ all the stock symbols, phrases, and poetic word pairs he could diploy for the sake of a unique theology – it is much too early and too close to the tragic event. But nevertheless he tried to work out his task, in order to express in the best way possible matters that defy the semantical capacity of his language. The analyst finds a full gamut of theological meanings, scattered haphazardly in the text; but a clue exists to help us construe them, since formal and backround topics pervade the apparent disorder.

The chapters carry particular semiotic 'targets' and hence, there are so many hints to the various subjects the author(s) considered to be worth illuminating. This is no "formula criticism, the final solution to all the questions about Hebrew poetry" [Watters, 1976, 146–147], but we think that once a formal setting had been established, the author(s) was compelled to find motifs strong enough to tie together the 'separate' parts of the composition. Many of these motifs eventually became theological topics and are to be interpreted as such. But they also function as factors of form unity and of sense unity, thus pervading the whole poem.

The problem of unity within the Book of Lamentations has long intrigued scholars. Many expressed profound doubt that the text might ever be regarded as an unified document in any sense of the term – neither formally nor in terms of its theological content. Some considered another solution: that the poems were individually composed, and that a later redactor arranged and modified them according to a pre-thought plan. These answers usually neglect or deny any major significance to recurring motifs whether formal motifs or meaning motifs.

What we propose to do is to attempt to shed more light on some of the above 'secondary' themes, to try to place them in some kind of proper perspective within the overall message of the book without distorting the

theological impact of the whole. The first of these concerns a matter of form: the alphabetical acrostic; the second deals with another 'unifying' topic: the image of the 'other'. We will suggest that both themes are of major importance for the general understanding of the text, and that one might in the same way look at other topics such as 'human suffering'. Applying a hermeneutic process to the themes above yielded fruitful results and might be extended if responsibly administered [see Geisler, 1976]. We therefore tried to relate the topics to later interpretations of the biblical text, namely to what the Rabbis thought about the book. Our approach is predominantly non-structuralist, but the core of the strategy we employed may be judged as heavily influenced by deconstructionism.

The methodological delimitations of our work are as follows: 1) there will be not attempt to deal directly with the issues of date, authorship, or place of composition; wherever we had to confront such thorny problems, we preferred to leave the questions open, since our work is, at least in this stage, preliminary to a deeper approach to be carried out later. Some of the questions allude to what we consider to be a valid answer; 2) we think that each chapter displays a discernible unity and can be treated as a coherent whole produced by a principal author; 3) the design of the entire book is the result of an informed redactional intention.

The post-biblical text we introduced, among other, in order to argue our opinions about the above topics, is Lamentations Rabbah. It is our midrashic system of reference and conclusions are related to it. It helped us a great deal to explain the opaque passages and the indirect references to our subjects. By far one of the greatest tasks that faced rabbinic Judaism was to interpret the biblical text of Lamentations. The reason is clear: in a period of less than seventy years the Jews lost three major wars – the revolt of 66–74 C.E., the uprising of the Jews of Cyrenaica, Egypt and Cyprus in 115–117 C.E., and the Bar Kokhba rebellion of 132–135 C.E.. Each of these caused enormous loss of life, and the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed in 70 C.E. In brief, the cultural map of Judaism had been radically and definitively altered. The Rabbis' first response, to judge by surviving writings, was near silence, since the Rabbis of the tannaitic period (70–200 C.E.) seem not to have written laments or to have sought refuge in apocalyptic dreams. They did not establish new fast days, nor did they accord a place in their curricula to the study of such momentous events. The Roman emperors are seldom mentioned, sites of resistance, such as Betar, appear only once, the names of the leaders of the revolts are never shown Perhaps they ignored the political realities in order to devote their energies to creating a religious system that could ensure the survival of Judaism, such as the work on the laws and on exegesis [Cohen, 1982, 19].

The interpretation of history was taken over by the Amoraim (200–400 C.E.) and the post-amoraic Rabbis (400–700 C.E.). They had to confront a text, i.e. the Book of Lamentations, which lacks historical details and moral motivations, and only alludes to the epoch when destruction had taken place. Rabbinic interpretation had to deal with blurred contours, and reacted to this challenge by transforming the linguistic (non-relevant) world of Scripture in its world of experience [Goldberg, 1990, 154]. The nowadays historian discriminates: texts from different periods of time have distinct meanings. The Rabbis, who were not historians, had to interpret a single text, the Lamentations, on the basis of their contemporaneity. Lamentations became relevant when related to casual occurences. Moreover, they had somehow to neutralize the destruction and defuse its subversive implications [Mintz, 1984, 49]. Now at a safe distance from the catastrophes of a bygone age, they could estimate the cultural loss, and they were aware that interpretations were needed to their poisoned past. Unless the tragedy could be absorbed into a theological explanation based on the covenant and ontological answers could be found, then the fall of Jerusalem would forever have the force of a terminal apocalypse. The Rabbis were conscious of living in an age in which the channel of prophecy had been closed and the Holy Spirit exiled from its previous abode. However, even though the Temple was destroyed, the text remained, the ground on which the grave issues raised by the destruction had been laid out. Because of the closure of divine relevation, the Rabbis did not have available to them the direct poetic speech of lamentation or the prophetic discourse of consolation. The only possible response to catastrophe was reading. And the text which had to be read, the text which on no account could be avoided, was the Book of Lamentations.

Except for some later additions, the entire aggadic Midrash Lamentations Rabbah, including the thirty-six proems, is a compilation redacted by a single redactor. He used tannaitic literature, the Jerusalem Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, and Leviticus Rabbah. Later midrashim, such as Ruth Rabbah, used it is a source. In the view of this and of its language, it was apparently redacted in Israel at about the end of the fifth century C.E. [see Zunz, 1919, 179–180; Strack, 1963, 218–219; Herr, 1971, 1378; Goldin, 1989, 115]. We should conclude by a clear statement concerning both texts: Lamentations is a biblical response to adversity; Lamentations Rabbah is a rabbinic response. The next chapters show the way they harmonize in meaning.

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1. The Meaning of the Alphabetical Acrostic

Among the different 'strong', 'conclusive' formulae to which the Book of Lamentations resorts to set off its meanings, the acrostic represents one of the most powerful items. More seldom has the question been raised whether there is a relationship between the form and the content of these songs. The alphabetical composition of the songs is observed and commented upon, but it is mostly regarded as a detail beside the point, without any significance for the content itself. So the question has to be raised if this apparently artificial, not to say labored, acrostic structure is only an external adornment, or if the author chose this form in order to say something specific by means of the alphabetical composition. The Rabbis were the first to give a valid symbolic explanation to the acrostic. Because of the lack of plain answers to problems concerning sin's nature within the חֵטְא, the Rabbis had to refer to a double strategy by which the concept of sin – its definition, contents, and circumstances rolled into one – could be brought to reader's attention using textual resources.

The first strategy touches the bare midrashic exposition and interpretation. We call it 'the explicit expression', because the rabbinic *lectio* follows up the verse in a continuous, even flow. The reading's coherence is uninterrupted and allows the audience to enjoy at once the midrashic glittering of ideas. The acrostic belongs to a second category, i.e. 'the implicit expression', because the reader has to look at the text in a more attentive manner, in order to take account of the subtlety of the poetic form. For the most part, the Hebrew acrostic, like any other poetic adornment, appeals to the mindful eye and not the ear. The author(s) had made the most of the means of 'physical' expression, alloting to the eye the significance due to a 'preliminary reader'. The real reader – if they are daring interpreters – had taken advantage of the carefully carved detail of form and eventually transformed it into an epitome of sin's complexity.

But this 'transformation' is due to a profound interpretative dive into an ocean of meanings. It might seem that the Rabbis chose the alphabetical acrostic for the same reason that a child, when asked to 'give a definition' of the natural

number, would begin to count number by number, as a way of understanding the infinite complexity of the matter. Nevertheless, this is not a definition in itself, but a clue to the dilemma, a thread which could lead the *ignoramus* from between its horns.

1.1. The alphabetical acrostic of the Book of Lamentations

The attentive eye will readily recognize the compositional irregularities at the beginning of each verse. However, all these marks are elements of a dominant order within the poetic framework enabling the acrostic to bring out the semiotical web deemed to structure the text.

The first four poems are composed of lines unequally divided, the first hemistich being the longer. Ever since Budde, the metre has been identified as basically a 3/2 stress [Budde, 1882]. Almost all critics agree that these chapters are shaped in the so-called *qinah* (קִינָה) metre (the lament metre), seldom found in a rigid form but constantly broken by a 2/2, 2/3, 3/3 pattern. The final poem is without doubt in the more familiar 3/3 rhythm.

The overall structure of the Book of Lamentations seems to be an example of the *qinah* pattern on the grandest scale. It is the acrostic form which enables the reader to analyse the poem as a whole and to become aware of the entire compositional structure. Definitely as a whole, but paradoxically, as a fragmented whole, since the discourse is non-narrative and therefore, requires a particular approach concerning the form. In spite of „the rhythm that always dies away" [Shea, 1979, 107], the *qinah* metre, as a formal device, is backed up by the alphabetical acrostic. But it is also necessary to stress that, since we have introduced into the analysis 'the reader', we should warn again that the acrostic is for the eye and not for the ear. We share the opinion according to which the book was intentionally written in precisely five chapters, no more, no less and that the author(s) were perfectly aware of the formal functions the alphabetical acrostic had accomplish. And whether the rhythm "dies" or not, that bothers the reader less since the acrostic. Ariadna's thread in a compositional labyrinth, aims to unify all the parties of the text.

What does the acrostic look like? In the Old Testament there are fourteen acrostics of partial acrostics (*Nahum* 1:2-8, *Ps.* 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145, *Prov.* 31:10–31, *Lam.* 1-4, *Sir.* 51:13-30, *Hab.* 1:2–2:1) of which the Book of Lamentations is by far the finest, and stands alongside of *Ps.* 119 as the largest in scope and execution [see Loehr, 1905]. The periods assigned to each letter may consist of one line (*Ps.* 111, 112), two (*Ps.* 34, 145), three (*Lam.* 3) or even sixteen lines (*Ps.* 119), or the lines may vary in number, as in *Lam.* 1 and 2, and to some extent in the Psalms. Where the period consists of several lines,

the initial letter is sometimes repeated with each line (*Lam*. 3) or distich (*Ps*. 119) |Woods, 1903, 25|. The latter is the more architecturally imposing with its twenty-two stanzas of eight lines each, every line beginning with the appropiate acrostic letter. Nevertheless, such a contrivance threatens to oppress the content and label the acrostic as a *tour-de-force* which does not approach literary or poetic excellence. Lamentations too has an architectural grandeur, but it is not monolithic, its unity being broken in innumerable pleasing ways, never distracting but always contributing to the total impression |Gottwald, 1954, 23|.

The acrostic is both an ornament and a stylistic solution to a dilemma set on by the need of expression: how to describe with subtlety a dreadful experience and how to 'can' the poetic content by using at once a fair and an inflexible form. Such a delicate literary creation deserved the exquisite treatment of the exterior garment, i.e. the embellishment of the poetic structure. In the meanwhile, its employment is derived from the need of a better control on the images of disintegration. The adding of an acrostic to the different requirements of the composition could have endangered the efectiveness of the text. This artificial composition of course formed an obstacle to the adjustment of the text in accordance with other formal demands. Some wilder less measured rhythm would seem to us to have been a fitter form of expression. Shortenings of the rhythm for the sake of a tangled form could have affected the intention of delivering an elaborate and clear-cut text, in which the unrelieved severity should have played an important role. Understanding and persuasion might have been sacrificed to cheap aesthetics, because the eye could be easily enticed away from reading and tempted to look only at the formal aspects. Thus, the entire core of the book's theology could be jeopardized by a slight and continuous drift of attention toward unwanted goals.

However, there is merely an apparent contradiction between the artificial literary form and the spontaneity of emotions. The alphabet is repeated four times with unvarying regularity: simultaneously, the symmetry and the directness of feeling force their way through the reader in a perfect concordance with the form-restrictive expedient. In the composition of Lamentations, there has been a surprising coalescence of form and vitality, helping the interpreter to perceive the powerful topic of "the spirit controlled by form". "A man true to the gift he has received will welcome the discipline of self-imposed rules for deep sorrow as well as for other strong emotions. In proportion as he is afraid of being carried away by the strong current of feeling, will he be anxious to make the laws more difficult, the discipline more effectual", concludes |Plumptre, 1863, 60|. The same motivation stands for any of the poetical forms; it would suffice to recall the complicated structure of the sonnet, as exemplified by Dante's selection (*terza rima*) for his vision of the unseen world. What the

sonnet was to Petrarch and to Milton, the alphabetic verse-system was to the writers of Jeremiah's time. This is that kind of text that made Joao Pinto Delgado, he himself the author of a series of poetical meditations entitled *Lamentaciones del Propheta Ieremias* (1727), note: "The Holy Text, which is full of so many misteries that one must beware of not only a word but a letter to many, cannot be adapted to the human type of poetry, with which the world is pleased, without much care and difficulty" |Wilson, 1949, 132|. There is nothing that could conduce to a similar conclusion as De Wette's, that this form of writing was the outgrowth of a feeble and degenerate age dwelling on the outer structure of poetry when the soul had departed |quoted by Plumptre, 1863, 59|. There is too much attention paid to form, too much elaboration than necessary. The Rabbis realized the inseparability of both within the intricate poetic edifice and by dint of it, the interpretation had preserved the impressive connotation of acrostic's use.

All the acrostics within the Book of Lamentations are of a simple type, and are so planned that the initials recurring at fixed intervals follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus, the first section of the poem starts with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, א; the second with the second letter, ב and so on down to the twenty-second and last letter, ת. The interval between the several letters consists of a regular number of lines |see Gray, 1929, 7|.

In chapters 1 and 2 each stanza has three lines, and only the first word of the first line of each is made to conform to the alphabet, so that stanza one begins with א and so on through the alphabet. Chapter 4 is of the same type, but here each stanza has only two lines. Chapter 3 is more elaborate: each stanza has three lines, and all three lines are made to begin with the proper letter, so that there are three lines starting with א, three with ב, and so on. As |Moore, 1983, 541| put it, " The 3-line acrostic of chapters 1 and 2 intensifies in chapter 3 where every line has to be chosen with care, while chapter 4 suddenly abandons this style for a 2-line structure. Chapter 5 then abandons the acrostic altogether". Chapter 5 is not an acrostic, but has exactly twenty-two lines and thus conforms to the alphabet to a lesser degree.

A minor peculiarity of the acrostics in chapter 2, 3 and 4 is that two of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet stand in the reverse of their normal order. Usually it is ע before פ, as is the order in chapter 1, but in the other acrostics the sequence is first פ, then ע. This peculiarity is found also in the Greek version of *Prov.* 31, and in the opinion of many scholars should be restored in *Ps.* 34, where the conventional order of the alphabet seems to violate the sense |see Pietersma, 1993|. A common explanation, going back to Grotius, is that the order of these letters of the alphabet was not yet fixed at this time. Delbert Hillers takes it as "sheerly hypothetical and rather improbable in view of the

consistent sequence 𝒴 – 𝕯 in Ugaritic abecedaries almost a millenium older than Lamentations and in view of the order of the Greek alphabet" [Hillers, 1972, XXVII].

The acrostic outline reaches its apex with the most elaborate sample in triplets in chapter 3, we stressed above, then descends to an acrostic in couplets in chapter 4, and finally goes to chapter 5 which was written only in individual bicola and contains no acrostic at all. Some authors consider these characteristics as explicit enough to prove that the Book of Lamentations was written in precisely five chapters, with three longer chapters with their poetic units in multiples of three, followed by two shorter chapters with their poetic units in multiples of two. Within this larger setting, the first three chapters were written in a *qinah* pattern, 2/1 in this case, on the basis of the type of acrostics they present, and the last two chapters were also written in a lament pattern, 2/1 again, on the basis of the length of their poetic units. It implies that the acrostics were purposedly designated to divide the text in two smaller cycles and one larger cycle of the *qinah* pattern which "dies away", because it was written in remembrance of Jerusalem, the city that died away [Shea, 1979, 107].

It has also been conjectured that the original writing was unfettered by the alphabetic structure and only at a later time was moulded to its finished state [Gottwald, 1954, 25]. Whether this supposition is valid or not, even though the Rabbis thought of it, is not our point, but the growing significance of the form. Definitely, the writer(s) of Lamentations were much more interested in conveying the message then in maintaining artistic purity; form was the only concession made to aesthetics. However, the predominant reason concerned the communication of the message: how to hand it over in an understandable manner. Later on, because of the deep significance attributed to the acrostic, manuscripts of all the standard codices show spaces left between the strophes beginning with the respective letters [Ginsburg, 1897, 20]. The thoroughness of the acrostic structure prompts a question which cannot be ignored: why has an acrostic gridding been composed on the textual tissue?

Scholars who have written about the motivation of the acrostic point out the hypothetical motive of memorization, thus reminding us of a well-cited quotation from W. F. Albright: "As has often been emphasized by scholars, writing was used in antiquity largely as an aid or guide to memory, not as a substitute for it" [Albright, 1946, 31]. This is by far the most frequent interpretation and was common in the previous century [see Streane, 1913, 355–359], according to this theory the acrostic could be explained as a merely pedagogic device; while in later years, P. A. Munch believed that the acrostics were model compositions (*Musterstuecke*) by which schoolboys were taught the alphabet [see Munch, 1936]. He regarded Lamentations as an exercise for

practising the style of the funeral lament. In order to form a fuller idea of the direction of this argument, it is worthwhile to quote Wilhelm Rudolph: "That Lamentations was composed for instruction because the teacher wished to practise with his students the style of the funeral lament, makes of the intense earnestness of these songs, written with lifeblood, merely an exercise in style" [Rudolph, 1939, 3]. He had also evinced that the unquestionable close relationship between wisdom literature and the ability to write might have put biblical scholars on the wrong track, hampering them from relating properly the emotional dynamic and the paradigms of form. And to quote again N. C. Gottwald: "It is conceivable that at some time in its early history the book was employed in didactic circles; it is, however, unimaginable that it was written for such purposes" [Gottwald, 1954, 26].

Nevertheless, the mnemonic explanation cleared of any further 'didactic' overstatement, seems to fit in with the concept of "the text's corporate personality" [Robinson, 1936, 50], i.e. with the cultic estimate of the book. It avoids the pitfalls of the previous positions by offering a straightforward purpose for the acrostic without depriving the entire work of its literary and religious nature. N. C. Gottwald rightly remarked the significance of the acrostics' repetition throughout the book. While he believed that one poet was responsible for at least the first four poems, he does not affirm that the author(s) intentionally wrote a composition which would consist of four or five parts. If one assumes for the moment that the book is a literary unit composed of five parts, it could be easily inferred that the acrostics would have limited practical value on behalf of memorization. Were the alphabet given only once, its usefulness might be admitted. It is more likely that the five poems were written, learned and recited separately during successive annual days of mourning over the fall of Jerusalem and later compiled as a cultic collection [Gottwald, 1954, 27–28]. This conclusion does not exclude, but supplements the idea of a commitment of form, as seen above [Shea, 1979, 107].

Memorization might have been a reason for the employment of acrostics but it seems obviously to us that the explanation does not suffice. Alfred Jeremias gave N. C. Gottwald the starting point which we shall follow up in further interpretation. The former quoted a rabbinic *dictum*: " When a person says the alphabet, he has thereby embraced all possibilities of words" [Jeremias, 1930, 665]. The literary form forcibly encompasses the means which enabled the author(s) to express the feelings of 'completeness' in respect of grief, sin, atonement, and hope. Let us recall the analogy we made with the series of natural numbers and the infinite opportunities one has to form other numbers out of each of the elements of the series through arithmetical operations. Bearing it in mind, we can see how reasonable sounds the following statement:

the alphabetical arrangement was chosen "to give an air of continuity as well as of exhaustive completeness to the lamentation, which constantly assumes new figures and turns of thought" |Keil, 1874, 337|. It clearly gave free way to a later supposition: all the letters may have been used in order to include and express suffering in its full range |Smit, 1930, 117|.

'Completeness' of meaning, i.e. the fullest evidence of the feelings alloyed in the poetic 'melting pot' requires a 'continuity' of form. Coupled with a masterly choice of language, the latter has an almost hypnotic effect comparable to the effect of Chopin's *Marche Funebre*. The acrostic penetrates the metaphoric contents like a white thread in a ceaseless flow and links the verses into definite functional divisions. It is not to be forgotten that dirges like *Amos* 5:16 ff or 2 *Sam.* 1:19–27 were of a ritual character and were normally uttered by a professionally trained class of women (see *Jer.* 9:17 ff). To the extent that chapters of the Book of Lamentations should have accomplished the same task in its early years, it may be inferred that, in order to have them properly written, a rhythm had to be preserved somehow. The oral rhythm was less perceivable since the lamentations were intented to be recorde within a written composition, therefore the rhythm had to be transposed into written signs. The means used were the *qinah* metre and the acrostic. The latter provides a 'visible' key to the understanding of the senses to which actually the form targets.

Such a structure offers the lamentations a movement of irreversible progression towards the unavoidable completion of the cycle. The end is marked by the last letter of the alphabet. It is through the acrostic that the inexorable certitude about the total fulfilment of God's will assumes shape. No chapter reaches a climax in defining the end; there is merely a sense of *denouement* the realization that the experiences march on and on towards exhaustive recitation |Lanahan, 1974, 45|. In naming the entire alphabet, one comes very close to a total development of any theme or the complete expression of any emotion or belief. If the subjects is to be exhausted, the alphabet alone can suffice to suggest and symbolize the totality striven after |Jahnow, 1923, 169|. By invoking the alphabet, one beseeches the 'completeness' of meanings' disclosure in a continous manner; this resembles cobra's movements to the sound of flute.

There is an obvious agreement between the external principle embodied by the acrostics and the internal spirit and intention of the work. It has been intended to play upon the collective grief of the community in its every aspect, from " א to ת ", "so that people might experience an emotional catharsis" |Gottwald, 1954, 30|. It makes no sense to overlook that the use of acrostics enforces the most judicious economy of expression upon the text. If two or three

line strophes were chosen, then the lengths of the poems could have become already predetermined and therefore, restrictive. Eventually, this is a method to preserve the unity of sense, since the authorial intention aims to shun the dissociation of the themes. By such a constraint, the resulting compactness takes the shape of a symbol representing the concentration of emotions. Through the acrostics the main themes of sin, suffering, submission, hope were bound together in a coherent structure, by which the conviction in the imminent intervention of God could be implanted. Trust and confidence in the heavenly goodness and in the divine permanence are suggested too. The very same role and symbolic importance reveal several well-known and widely-quoted passages from the Book of Revelation. Either the universality of Christ's message (" 'I am Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'", *Rev.* 1:8) or His acknowledgement as the unique principle, *principium mundi* (" I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end", *Rev.* 21:6; " I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last", *Rev.* 22:13) use an analogous metaphor.

To this, it might be added that the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet are used in the Old Testament literature not only to indicate totality. An interesting usage is found in the Book of Jeremiah, wherein the letters are replaced by each other on certain occasion in an intentionally secret manner. Thus in *Jer.* 25:26 and 51:41 the בבל in the consonant text (in full reading 'Babel') was replaced by ששך (in full reading 'Sheshach'), and in *Jer.* 51:1, לבקמי (divided in two words and read out as 'leb qamay', i.e. 'the heart of my adversaries') was inserted in stead of the name of the enemies כשדים ('kashdiym', 'the Chaldeans'). In these cases, the letters replace each other according to a cryptographic scheme, called אתבש ('athbash'), in which the letters of the alphabet are substituted in reverse: the first and the last letter replace each other, the second and the penultimate and so on. The centre of the alphabet thus becomes the elevents letter כ and the twelfth ל, which replace each other. In a poetic form related to the successive order of the letters of the alphabet, it might have been important to make correspond the first and the second halves of the alphabet and its turning point at the centre. However, it is worth saying that the texts of the Book of Jeremiah are likely to be dated not too far from the time when Lamentations came into being. Consequently, a like interpretation of the form, in so far as this concerns the implicit meanings, could be aplied to the latter. The centre of the book, according to its content, is to be found in the middle section of the third chapter |see Johnson, 1985, 61|. If the alphabetical form had been used to indicate the central nub with a symmetrical half on each side, it should have been employed to point out the symbolic significance of the third chapter. A large number of critics regard it as a

summary of "the progress of thought" within the Book of Lamentations [Hillers, 1972, 64].

It should not be surprising to discover that biblical translations always paid attention to the textual accidents, such as the acrostics. By way of background, it may be useful to recall (as was mentioned above) that in Hebrew biblical manuscripts the alphabetic units or strophes of the Book of Lamentations 1-4 are regularly demarcated by extra spacing, as is the case, for example, in the manuscripts that served as the basis for Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (e.g. Leningrad B manuscript) [Pietersma, 1993, 2]. Interestingly, no extra spacing was introduced in *Lam.* 5, the only non-acrostic composition in the group. C. D. Ginsburg mentions the extra spacing between alphabetic units as a standard feature of Hebrew biblical codices [Ginsburg, 1966, 20]. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible extra spacing to highlight the alphabetic units was only used in the case of *Ps.* 119. As commentators have noted, the extra spacing in *Lam.* 1-4 visibly calls attention to the acrostic feature and apparently underscores the importance attached to it [see Gottwald, 1954, 25].

In a similar manner, special attention was drawn to the acrostic structure in the Syriac tradition. The majority of manuscripts of the Peshitta (beginning in the VI th century AD), according to Albrektson [Albrektson, 1963, 38], include the letters of the alphabet as discrete labels, most often within the text proper, sometimes in the margin and occasionally in both locations. This is so in spite of the fact that the Peshitta translation has usually been able to reproduce the alphabetic feature of the Hebrew.

When we turn to the other ancient translation directly made from the Hebrew, namely Jerome's Vulgate, we find again that the acrostic structure of *Lam.* 1-4 was deemed important enough to have been reflected in the Latin text, even though the names of the Hebrew letters, which Jerome inserted at the head of each strophe, could scarcely have been intelligible to the average Latin reader. Indeed in *Lam.* 3 it is noteworthy that Jerome added the appropriate letter not simply at the outset of every stanza (as happens in Greek manuscripts) but at the head of every line of every three-line strophe, in order to show that all lines in the *hebraica veritas* begin with the same letter. The Latin tradition is not far from the Greek tradition. Since the majority of textual witnesses to *Lam.* 1-4 has the Hebrew alphabetic strophes labelled with the names of the Hebrew letters (in Greek script), it is clear that the acrostic structure was at some point copied from the Hebrew text into the Greek. To sum up, there can be no doubt that the acrostic structure of the Book of Lamentations received special attention in Hebrew manuscript tradition, in the Peshitta, in the Vulgate, not to mention the peculiar setting in the Septuagint.

There should be a point of convergence, for the different approaches drew on the acrostics' significance. As we examine the sundry explanations to the meaning of its setting, the more we should recall a passage from Cassiodorus: "Jeremiah bemoaned the captivity of Jerusalem in a quadruple alphabetical Lamentation, indicating to us, by the sacrament of letters, the mysteries of celestial things" [quoted in Naegelsbach, 1871, 17].

1.2. The rabbinic commentary to the alphabetical acrostic

The rabbinic view preserves the selective reading through which the acrostic are supposedly embedded with symbolic significance. Beginning with the gaonic age, acrostics either alphabetical, nominal (giving the author(s) name) or textual (giving a biblical quotation) are frequently found in Hebrew literature [Abrahams, 1901, 171]. The midrashic compilation referred to as *Midrash Hazita (Canticles Rabbah)* ascribes to King Solomon the composition of acrostics: "But Solomon made an alphabetical poem and five letters in addition, as it is written: 'And his song (שִׁירוֹ) was a thousand and five' (*1 Kings* 5:12), [as if to say] what was left over (שׁוּרָה) from the alphabet was five. " (1, 1:7). The manner Solomon searched out and analysed the words of the Torah (by building a 'suprastructure'; see *Canticles Rabbah 1*, 1:6) alludes to the sacrality of his invention. The acrostic is a by-product of thinking divine matters and therefore it carries the imprint of divinity through a specific form. The 'thousand' (אָלֶף) taken out from the biblical quotation sound similarly to אָלֶף and could be generically rendered as designating the alphabet in its integrality by means of a 'nickname'. Even more suggestive, the same explanation of its origin occurs in the *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* as inference to one of the first chapter's verses:

ונתתי אח – לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה

"And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom" (1:13). Because of his daring curiosity in disclosing the secret structures of the "sacred shape" (Gershom Scholem's formula), Solomon is refered to as 'a spy for wisdom', exceedingly interested in the exploration of the concealed parties of the Law.

Another midrash (*Pesikta Rabbati* 46) attributes the acrostic to Moses: "And Moses came and they began (*Ps.* 92) with the letters of his name: השבת נאמן שיר [לקם]" Both historicity and everlasting use are alloted to the acrostic. The item is claimed to be as antique as the Pentateuch and carries the סֹף meaning of the Law. The same midrash also asserts that the Bible contains acrostics of words, namely that the spirit of the Scripture is pervaded by an

alphabetic order. Here 'Order' implies the opportunity to decipher the code. Even the tools to be used in a cryptographic foray are alphabetic, because there are no other signs to represent speech and numbers at once. Again we come across the recurrent theme: the white thread binds together chapter‚of the Torah and deep meanings transcending levels of creation and understanding, as well as discoursive flows.

Even during an informal discussion, to make mention of acrostics was a *question d'honneur* for the speakers and one of the criteria to estimate somebody's intellectual ability. Here is an illustrious example: "After they [R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, accompanied by the eminent men of Jerusalem] had eaten and drunk, some recited songs and other alphabetical acrostics. " (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* VII, 8:1; *Ruth Rabbah* VI, 4). It resembles the peripathetic style of revealing senses through an apparent light μαιηουτικη, which should not mislead the reader to earthly explanations on the phenomenon. Their talk does not have anything in common with Petronius'. This constitutes a further relevance to acrostic's importance, even though, as it was precedently stated, the device is visible through writing. During informal talk, veiled connotations may fade, as they are contained within the perceivable form, but recitation accompanied by a right tune may accurately reproduce the formal reasons that justify acrostics' existence in a communicative framework. Once the matter is set in that way, it is difficult not to feel a certain unease about the method employed to make the reader ponder over the acrostics; one may ask whether it is not blasphemious in what concerns the meanings the acrostics should convey. However, the all-too-European XVIII th century provides proofs in favour of the intellectual efficacity of the Voltairian-styled conversation, during which parables, witticisms and puns are on display for everybody, *lesefaul* or not.

Let us come back to the acrostic pattern in the Book of Lamentations. Its general meaning for the Rabbis could be read in *Lamentations Rabbah* I, 1-2:20:..Why is the Book of Lamentations composed as an alphabetical acrostic? R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis suggest answers. R. Judah said: 'Because it is written "Yea, all Israel have transgressed Thy Law [and turned aside, refusing to obey Thy voice. And the curse and oath which are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him.[' (*Dan*, 9:11), which is written [with almost all the letters] from נ to ח ; therefore is this book composed as an alphabetical acrostic, one corresponding to the other". [Soncino edition, 87, n.3]. Buber's edition of the text reads slightly differently, and it is worthwhile to pay attention to it, because the explanations are clearer and add nuances to the previous quoted translation: "R. Judah said: Because they transgressed the

Torah from **א** to **ת**, therefore it is composed as an alphabetical acrostic. R. Nehemiah said: Because they transgressed the Torah, since it is written, "Yea, all Israel have transgressed Thy Law |and turned aside, refusing to obey Thy voice. And the curse and oath which are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him|' (*Dan.* 9:11), therefore it is composed as an alphabetical acrostic, one corresponding to the other. The Rabbis said: Because they transgressed from **א** to **ת** " |Soncino edition, 87, n.3.|. Indeed, the biblical quotation provides almost all the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, less **ב**, **ו**, **ם**, and **צ** :

שמׂע נקלֹר וחחד יֹלֹינן האלֹה וֹהשנעה אשד בחנֹגה נחֹזרח מֹטה
– האלֹהים נֹי חֹטאנו לֹו : זֹלֹ – יֹשֹראלֹ צֹנֹרז אֹת חֹזֹרחֹר זֹמֹור לֹנֹלֹהֹי
יֹכֹבֹר

However, the Midrash provides an end to grief by ascribing to the prophets the power by which the alphabetical 'curse' might be called off: "R. Nehemiah said: Although Jeremiah cursed them with the alphabetical acrostic of Lamentations, Isaiah anticipated him and pronounced a healing for them verse by verse down to 'Let all their wickedness come before Thee' (*Lam.* 1:22) " |*Lam. Rabbah* 1, 1, § 21; 2, § 23|. Even the text is written, the sense it conveys might be called back to the source where it stems from, thus hindering the words to undergo an maleficient transformation. Such a magical inference makes Abraham's trial possible (see below).

On the hand, a saintly life had been equated with the fulfilment of the whole Torah from the beginning to the end. A virtuous life is, nevertheless, at least as precious as the commandments in themselves. 'Marriage', for instance, which is a common allegory for the communion through obedience with the divine word, has been related to the acrostic; in this case, the alphabetic arrangement presents a similar symbolic value as in the matter of 'sin': "R. Acha said: If a man marries a godly wife, it is as though he had fulfilled the whole Torah from beginning to end. To him applies, 'The wife is like a fruitful wine' (*Ps.* 128:3). Therefore the verses of the chapter of the virtuous wife in *Proverbs* 31 are arranged in complete alphabetical sequence |and no letter is missing, as in other alphabets in the Bible| from **א** to **ת** (*Ruth Zuta,* ed. Buber, IV; II, p. 24b).

Alphabet and Torah are deemed to contain the same conception of embodiment of totality and plenitude and, thus, of perfection. The concept of Absolute Unity, which was considered climactic in the understanding of God, also defines one of the most important qualities the Rabbis ascribed to the Torah: its completeness. We read in the Talmud: "R. Joseph recited: Read not 'at my sanctuary', ובמקדשׁי (*Ezek.* 9:6), but 'at my saints', ובמקורשׁי. This

refers to the people who fulfilled the Torah from א to ה " (*Shabbath*, 55a). The passage is related to *Ezek*, 9:4: "Go and mark a ה of ink upon the foreheads of the righteous, so that the angel of destruction may have no power over them. But mark a ה of blood upon the forehead of the wicked, so that the angel of destruction may have power over them. " The diference between the righteous and the wicked consists of their degree of attachment to the Law, but the Attribute of Justice believes that the righteous could have prevented the wicked. They did not perform such a deed, therefore some of the responsability incurred from the non-observance of the Torah rests upon them. The presence of the ה as a "mark of exemption from judgement" |Montefiore-Loewe, 1938, 307| signifies its link to the final judgement; the ה is a messianic symbol and marks the end of the human history, the accomplishment of a historical cycle. "The ה is the conclusion of God's seal, which is אמת, 'truth', and which is composed of the first, middle and last letters of the alphabet (*Talmud Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* I, § 1, 18a) " |*Idem*|. The first, middle and the last letter of the alphabet compose a short version of the alphabetical acrostic; hence, the acrostic preserves its qualities even in an abridged form. In a later Midrash, one could find a similar statement concerning acrostic's completeness: "Adam transgressed the whole Law from א to ה and there was only Abraham who "kept the whole Law from א to ת" (*Yalkut Reubeni*, quoted in |Harris, 1887, 93, note|).

The completeness both of the Torah and of the acrostic, represents their common denominator. The latter embodies the totality of the letters, which are one of Creation's results, and the Law, the *summum* of the commandments, namely the divine words. Letters and commandments could be then considered as 'sub-categories' related one to another by a symbolic link, similar in nature for both of them: they are 'parties' of a divine deed or action, contain the attributes of immutability, and are the main criteria in gauging the human moral or intellectual quality. A certain times the letters were understood as immutable essences, i.e. once created they cannot suffer any tranformation. They share symbolic defitions that stem from their geometrical shape. Each is entitled to acknowledge a theological dilemma and to offer the right answer to it (see *Shabbath*, 104a).

This is actually part of the rabbinic understanding of the nature of human communication and it brings us near the Kantian aprioric categories. How could an acrostic, made from letters, be otherwise than its compounds? Therefore , it exists in an aprioric form, in an unchanged divine-refined essence that can express the subtlest meaning of the godly will. The acrostic is divine message in itself; like the letters, so is the acrostic.

A question such as 'why are the letters connected to the Law and not some other divinely-conceived signs?' received various rabbinic answers. One of them, related to *Eccles.* 7:8 ("Better is the end of a thing than its beginning: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit"), is related to the subject of teaching the Torah by referring to letters and implicitly to the written contents of the Law as to 'unquestionable' concepts. A Persian who wanted to understand the Torah kept asking why א represents the beginning in the alphabetical order and necessarily ב has to follow it. Grabbed by the ear by one of the Rabbis, the Persian cried in pain, "My ear, my ear", giving the rabbi a reason to rebuke him with the same pointless question: "Who says this is your ear? " (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah,* 7:8, 1). The order of the letters is also axiomatic and the Rabbis deemed it to be as aprioric as both Laws, the Written and the Oral Laws, are. Definitely it is impossible to separate the Written Law from the Oral Law and, by comparison, it is impossible to separate the alphabet from its meaning. When a heathen asked Hillel to be taught only the Written Torah, after he had already been scolded by Shammai, the rabbi accepted him as a proselyte. On the first day he taught him the letters of the alphabet in the usual order, but in the following day he reversed the order. When the heathen protested, Hillel answered: "Is it not upon me that you have to rely to know the correct order of letters in the alphabet? Then you must also rely upon me for the validity of the Oral Torah" (*Shabbat,* 31a).

The latter set forth a scholastic principle in order to supply a definition: he resorted to a *consensus omnium* – like statement. Everybody knows that א is א and ב is ב. The demonstration helps us to grasp one of the acrostic's functions: it reproduces at a larger scale the meaningful personality of all the letters. Thus it may be inferred that the acrostic is integral as such and self-sufficient. Because letters have always been axiomatic-wise defined (see, for instance, the late *Sefer Yezirah* and the references in *Sanhedrin* 65b, 65b–66a; *Shabbath* 103b–104a), these characteristics were immediately transferred to the acrostic, so that none of the letters' qualities is lost during the 'process'. The socalled 'short acrostic' is explained in a similar style; אמת encompasses all the truth in the world and it represents God's seal. The reasons were plainly set down (see above): א is the first letter of the alphabet, מ is in the middle and ת is the last, thus signifying: "I am the first and I am the last, and beside Me there is no God" (*Isa,* 44:6) (*Shabbath* 55a, *Sanhedrin* 1:1, 18a; *Song Rabbah* 1:9, §1).

So much about the organic attributes ascribed to the alphabetical acrostic. *Lamentations Rabbah* offers a text on which a deeper insight can be exercised, applying the semiotic scheme sketched above. The example presented before may be linked to another one extracted from *Sanhedrin* 104a–104b: "R

Jochanan said: Why were they [the Israelites] smitten with an alphabetical dirge? Because they violated the Torah, which was given by means of the alphabet. "The letters of the alphabet carried out from the heavens the text of the Law. By the same token, the letters can 'carry out' from the biblical text ist senses, whether they are bound to the theme of 'sin' – thus shaping the theology of sin – or to the subject of 'redemption' – outlining an impeding occuring future.

The acrostic is considered to be such a great importance that later interpreters of the Book of Lamentations took for granted that the form was conceived as the first urgency, then the blank spaces in between the letters were filed up with poetry. This is how Ben Sirach is said to have written down proverbs in accordance with the order of the letters. We are told that he took over Baruch's style of composition: "...he composed the alphabetic lamentations [the Book of Lamentations] at the command of Jeremiah, who rented to him the letters of the alphabet while he immediately formed the verses". [Ginzberg, 1928, VI, 401].

The adequate reading of R. Jochanan's saying seems to indicate that letters, and consequently the acrostic are representative for the entire multitude of sins. There is a direct relationship between the *summum* of human sins and the acrostic, an evident link when referring to a certain aspect; we may call it 'capacity': both parties take in a finite number of elements. Certainly, sins may number more than twenty-two, but somehow their row finally ends. The Israelites transgressed the Torah from א to ת and there is nobody to contest it. But, in the meanwhile, no more sins have to be imputed to them. The Rabbis properly understood the psychic importance of a finite guilt and that an end to sinning may call an end to suffering. Softening the harsh accents of incrimination meant for them a removal of the yoke. Moreover, for a finite number of impieties against the prescription of the Law, the people had to face up to the destruction. Destruction, ethnic dissolution should then have an end as well. We can go further and assert that because the alphabet is finite, what could exist beyond it does not represent a sign of communication or, the least, not a device that can be used in addressing God.

It is relevant now to turn to another feature of the rabbinic interpretation: it follows from it that the Lord never accused the Israelites for the abominations that took place during the siege, because of the famine, of the war's afflictions. What we usually describe as 'history', namely a moral judgement inflicted on the past, ends up bluntly, 'acrostic-like' in the moment when everyday's order was replaced by a total mayhem, caused by the Gentiles.

The acrostic bears the sins of the Israelites' is our next departure point. It seems obvious to us that the Rabbis were aware of this interpretation and strived

to counteract its effects of ill omen. They knew the code and they did not pay attention to the temptation of a superficial reading of the biblical text. Once they had grasped its usage and the symbolic scapegoat had been found, they tried to exorcise the acrostics' maleficent attributes. The formula they had chosen was to stage a dispute between a prominent representative of the people in distress and the 'prosecutors', i.e. the letters of the Torah.

Such a reason determined the contents of *Proem XXIV* in the first half of *Lamentations Rabbah*. Through R. Samuel b. Nachman's voice is described a trial during which Abraham is the advocate of the Israelites and the accusers keep changing. The trial was set in the heavens and began in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. A impressive range of symbols concerning the acrostic form and its connotation as sin bearer, are embedding the text.

"Abraham came weeping before the Holy One", we are told, "plucking his beard, tearing his hair, striking his face, rending his garments, with ashes upon his head and walked about the Temple, lamenting and crying. "The despairing appearance, resembling to a character from a Greek tragedy, caused the Ministering Angels to compose lamentations, thus fulfilling the chorus' part in the credit lines. They arranged themselves in rows like mourners, repeating a verse from *Isaiah* (33:8): " The highways lie waste, the wayfaring man ceaseth. Covenants are broken, witnesses are despised, there is no regard for man. "Once we remember the peculiar disposition of the lines within the third chapter of the Book of Lamentations, we can understand where the rabbi took the 'rows like mourners' allegory from.

Moreover, inside this sequence of the biblical text the *dramatis personae* 8God, Zion) change because of the modification of the speaker's person. The first verse opens with הגבר אני (I am them" an, using גבר to point out the unmistakable male) and direct speech is never converted into an indirect speech. The set-out is strikingly similar to *Proem XXIV*'s trial like arrangement Abraham Keeps asking the reasons for the strength of pounishment inflicted on the Jews. In his discourse, individual troubles blend with universal penalties brought in through the use of "we" passages, all being references to a more than personal disaster. He ventures to compare the present time with 'the good old days' invoking the testimony of the heavenly host, who supposedly shared with Israelites an undisturbed life. We are not far from Bossuet's *Discurses funebres* in style and in rhetorical construction. In brief, the patriarch's pleading has many elements in common with the evidence of the 'speaking voice' in the third chapter. At least both speeches are built up on the reality of facts in the aftermath of the destruction.

The compassionate behaviour of the Angels called God's attention to it, and, therefore, an unavoidable question followed: "Why do you string dirges together over this incident, standing rows upon rows?" It seems that the angelic expression of pain does not fit very well with the instructions they were given from God. The Heaven is, *par excellence*, a place of quiet and peaceful harmony. The question – and I hope it is not a blasphemous thought – could be either put by somebody who does not have the slightest idea of what is going on around Him, or by an angry master, stirred up by his servants' uproar. In answering God's dissimulated anxiety, they subsequently explained why 'rows like mourners' is a valid allegory and functions as such: "Sovereign of the Universe, because of Abraham Thy friend who came to Thy house, and lamented and wept; why didst Thou disregard him?" In reply, God uses a rhetorical artifice and invites Abraham, through a non-answerable question, to address Him directly. Later on, a forthright retort is given to the latter's predictable inquiry: "Sovereign of the Universe, why hast Thou exiled my children and delivered them over the heathen nations who have put them to all kinds of unnatural death and destroyed the Temple, the place where I offered my so Isaac as a burnt-offering before Thee?" The Holy One, blessed be He, replied to Abraham: "Thy children sinned and transgressed the whole of the Torah and the twenty-two letters which it is composed.' "This is the point where the alphabet, and by the same token the acrostics, are recognized as sin-definers and sin -carriers. But Abraham, stubborn enough and determined to find a way out of the dilemma apparently solved by God's 'axiomatic' answer, pursues the matter further. He asks for witnesses, thus paying no heed to the divine reply and taking no care of the rules of amiable dialogue. As a matter of fact, he dares to challenge God by urging a presentation of the valid arguments. It happens that at once prosecutors and witnesses are the Law and the letters: "'Sovereign of the Universe, who testifies against Israel that they transgressed Thy Law?' He replied to him, 'Let the Torah come and testify against Israel.' Forthwith the Torah came to testify against them. "

The setting had already changed: the celestial edifice had become a court-room. As was expected, Abraham behaves like a skilled and artful lawyer and tried to intimidate the testifier by means of a scarcely concealed blackmail: "My daughter, art thou come to testify against Israel that they transgressed thy commandments and hast no shame before me! Remember the day when the Holy One, blessed be He, handed thee about to every nation but they refused to accept thee until my children came to mount Sinai accepted thee and honoured thee; and now thou comest to testify against them in the day of their trouble! " As though an uneven addressing did not suffice, the patriarch throws his best cards: details from Torah's pre-earthly history that could have damaged its

'public image' and make out of it a mere accepted set of principles, but definitely not a divinely begotten code.

The reference to the Law as Abraham's daughter apparently contradicts its immutability as acknowledged by the Rabbis. God's word seems to be an antiquated diatagma, that never grows anew but gets older because of the human life cycle. However, R. Samuel b. Nachman's understanding is far away from this conclusion which may mislead the modern reader to perceive differently the rabbinic mode of explanation. In fact, nothing had changed neither in the textual meaning nor in the rabbi's expunding. Abraham styled himself as 'father' because of the common assumption according to which the Law had been brought out from the Heaven by his nation, i.e. Abraham's nation. This represents in other terms than the bare physiology, the 'birth of an order', its setting into the human time and space. The Law became 'alive' through an indirect paternity, soon as it had been inserted into the flow of Israelites' historiy. She is not 'a daughter', we dare to imitate a rabbinic response, but 'as a daughter' and so it happened after its acceptance by the Jews. The setting of the Torah among the Jews pinned the Israelite people to the letters of the Law, so that any of them can testimony for the due respect. This conclusion recalls a Hassidic interpretation which is closely related to Abraham's trial, and gives a clue on the interdependence between the Israelites, their deeds and thoughts, and the letters of the Law: "The myriads of letters in the Torah stand for the myriads of souls in Israel. If one single letter is left out of the Torah, it becomes unfit for use; if one single soul is left out of the union of Israel, the Divine Presence will not rest upon it. Like the letters, so the souls must unite and form a union" |Buber, 1962, 79|.

Abraham's threatening gives free way to haggle his silence for Torah's silence. Does it not drop a hint to a certain 'selectivity' the reading of the Law could conduct to? If read in a certain key, the Law might conceal what happened to it, namely the lack of respect of the Jews towards the divinely gifts. Further, the patriarch concluded his heartful plea insisting on 'the acceptance', a term coined to designate the clue of the artificial relationship Abraham had pointed up.

For the sake of a deeper approach on the meaning, we should recall a widely-quoted chapter from the *Mekhilta* |Friedmann's edition, 67a| related to *Ex.* 20:2. All the nations were asked to receive the Law, in order not to give them an excuse for saying: "Had we been asked, we might have accepted it. " Whenever He revealed Himself to others (the children of Esau, of Ammon, of Moab, of Ishmael), He received the same reply, a typified 'nay' justified by various pre-emptive customs or convictions. Only the Israelites accepted it on a voluntary basis and had to cope with its requirements. For the Rabbis, the fact in

itself was explicit enough to absolve of punishment the entire series of sins commited from the beginning to the end. No reward, no friendly gesture could be sufficient to recompense Jews' assentment. Following up the reasoning, no chastisement is accurately motivated but breaks down into infinite dialectic loopings in a attempt to motivate it, to overcome the 'technical flow' occured during the past time.

With Abraham having complete control on the situation, the personified Torah is put in an awkward predicament. Consequently, it is compelled to backtrack, apparently without uttering a single word: "When the Torah heard this, she stood aside and gave no testimony against them. " Abraham shut it up, after he cunningly resorted to critical reckoning of the text's qualities.

Such a withdrawal takes on a variety of implicit functions, but for our purpose, this cornucopia of senses can be ultimately generalized and shaped in one sentence: the human truth is stronger than the scriptural texts' truth. The text, we learned from Bakhtin, is of an unchangeable nature and therefore cannot be adapted to circumstances. It may carry a certain amount of true enunciations, as well as it may be filled up with falsities. No mater what its contents, the text is expressive and can be interpreted in one of two ways. But the letters and their arrangement are the same; only its 'mirror-image' (the interpreter's explanatory reaction towards the written signs and their pagesetting) could be subject to changes. And especially in this particular case, when Abraham deals with a coherent and self-sufficient text of divine extraction, the Torah, the Scripture proves itself ineffective in facing a rhetoric challenge. It goes without saying that the rhetorical challenge is a moral and historical one as well.

The same feeling of uneasiness about their symbolic fate haunt next witnesses, the letters, all of them tied to the chariot of the pentateuchal text. This time, Abraham takes another stand against his challengers; he accuses the letters of transgressing God's words and thus, of trying to re-interpret, to overdo the divine *dicta*. א is rebuked by reason that it is the letter which opens God's discourse on Mount Sinai: "I (אנכי) am the Lord thy God". Abraham takes his chance to reverse the theme of 'acceptance'. In connection with the next letter (ב), the patriarch refers to the undisputable authority that stems from its position in the opening verse of *Genesis*: בראשית בר א receives a similar treatment so that it "immediately stood aside and gave no testimony against them |the Israelites|. " The proem runs on: "When the reminder of the letters saw that Abraham silenced these, they felt ashamed and stood apart and did not testify against Israel. " So ends the first part of the trial: the following section narrates the dialogue between God and Abraham on sins and punishment, and is less

relevant for our demonstration. The episode was deemed so significant for the heavenly activity of the Patriarchs, that it appears in later midrashic and sermon collections (e.g. *Pesikta de Rab Kahana* 12:24).

The symbolic definition of the full alphabetical acrostic acquired further relevance by linking it to the sundry aspects of the 'sin'. We share Solomon Schechter's opinion by virtue of which: "The whole later mystical theory which degenerates into the combinations of letters to which the most important meaning is attached, takes its origin from these personifications. " |Schechter, 1909, 129|. Schechter refers to the same text we analysed before and he successfully grasped the importance the Rabbis attributed to the letters and implicitly to the acrostic. In fact, this is one of the samples of the rabbinical way of thinking a 'matter', a Kantian essence, by dint of its form, the latter being endowed with particular qualities extracted from the contents. We ventured to re-create, to re-trace the running steps of rabbinic reasoning, paying attention to the unity of ideas and teachings specific to the spiritual outlook of the amoraic period.

It is possible to confirm the validity of the approach by bringing out another proof of rabbinic textual idiosyncrasies. It touches again on the relation between the acrostic and sin, but this time it concerns the means by which human deeds, sins *y compris*, could be perceived and squarely-defined.

One of the characteristics of the poems in the Book of Lamentations is that while the first poem has the conventional order of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, the next three poems exhibit the arrangement of פ – ע rather than the normal ע – פ . This unconventional order is elsewhere attested only in *Ps.* 9 and 10, though its alphabetic acrostic is defective and hence not fully reliable. As a matter of fact, any irregularity occuring within the acrostic form, interrupting the expected shape, may be subject to a hidden meaning. The absence of נ in *Ps.* 145, for instance, obliges the Rabbis to develop on explanation concerning the fate of Israel (*Berakhot*, 46). In our case, the midrashic explanation follows verse 16 of the second chapter: "All thine enemies have opened their mouth wide against thee" and it reads: "Why does the verse beginning with the letter פ precede that beginning with the letter ע ? Because they uttered with their mouth (פה) what they had not seen with their eye (עין)."It is plain that the author(s) has made a pun on the meaning of the letters, in the meanwhile hinting to one of the possible major sins: slander. The reference to a seening opposition between the five senses is a commonplace in tannaitic and amoraic literature, not to mention the later developments of the theme, either in the midrashic compilations or in the mystical texts. The fragment taken from *Lamentations Rabbah* raises the question of priority between the language and the sight. It

may be extended to a question concerning the validity, the quality of the connection between 'allegation' and its proofs, or between 'text' (which does not require anything else but eyes to be read) and 'discourse' (defined by speech, by mouth's activity). Definitely, the sight is responsible for all the contacts a human being makes with the medium. The sight provides 'raw material' to be analysed, labeled and kept in mind. "Seeing assures remembering", the Rabbis deemed worthwhile to add to a passage from *Num.* 15:39: "See and remember" (*Menachot*, 43b). The 'eye' takes out from the surroundings anything it is able to perceive, but the memory performs the due selection. Therefore the 'eye' is out of control in distinction to the 'mouth', on which the mind holds sway and supplies it with the matters to be expressed (see *Tanchuma, Toledoth*, § 12).

Hence, the reversed order of פ and י gives priority to the 'mouth' over the 'eye' and epitomizes the mechanism of calumny. It is worth stressing that the subjects is not related to the Israelites, but their enemies, who are seen as braggers and malevolent characters. However, a talmudic reference links the fact to one of the greatest sins the Israelites had ever commited: the false account of the spies who were sent out towards the land of Canaan. The passage reads as follows: "Rabbah said in R. Jochanan's name, "Why did he place the פ before the י? Because of the spies who spoke with their mouth what they had not seen with their eyes. " (*Sanhedrin*, 104b).

But this is a secondary implication, less significant to us than the striaght definition given to one of the capital sins. The set-back ('to see' versus 'not to say') alludes to *Deut.* 4:9 ("lest thou forget the things thine eyes saw"). If the 'things' are replaced by a definite object, as the 'sins', the deuteronomic warning refers to what we may call 'the persistency of sin'. Rashi's commentary is very helpful: "But only then when you do not forget them (הרבכים) but will do them in their correct manner, will you be accounted wise and understanding men, but if you do them in an incorrect manner through forgetfulness, you will be accounted foolish". Understanding through unforgetfulness, is the only way by which sin, either intentional or unintentional, can be avoided. The 'sin' functions as a moral parameter because of individual or/and group experiences and it is fixed forever in the memory as a 'not-to-be-done-action'. It accomplishes a social task by which individuals could be labeled as 'sinners' or 'saints' at different degrees of variation. The 'sin in Lamentation had been publicly experienced and, therefore 'seen'. Once it is forgotten, people are doomed to reiterate it. Hence, "thou forget not'. The interpretation applied to the reversed order of the two letters offers another clue to what 'sin' should have meant for the generation punished with another destructive attempt at the turn of the millenia.

The acrostic therefore provides a purely external structural for the poem, predictable and yet open to all the possibilities of expression and fragmentation |Landy, 1990, 333|. The Rabbis were able to exhaust the meanings of the poetic scaffolding. But the formal structure works with still better results at a deeper level. The acrostic is a sign of the figurative language – the system of signs *par excellence* – in which all the letters of the alphabet cooperate to generate meaning. Beyond this, only beyond this, the acrostic is a mere intellectual play, free of significance, one of the multiple adornments that permeate Hebrew poetry.

<div align="right">(to be continued)</div>

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