

## THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

In this commentary, Joshua A. Berman considers Lamentations as a literary work that creates meaning for a community in the wake of tragedy through its repudiation of Zion theology. Drawing from studies in collective trauma, his volume is the first study of Lamentations that systematically accounts for the constructed character of the narrator, a pastoral mentor who engages in a series of dialogues with a second constructed character, daughter Zion, who embodies the traumatized community of survivors. In each chapter, the pastoral mentor speaks to a different religious typology and a different sub-community of post-destruction Judeans, working with daughter Zion to reconsider her errant positions and charting for her a positive way forward to reconnecting with the LORD. Providing a systematic approach to the careful structure of each of its chapters, Berman illuminates how biblical writers offered support to their communities in a way that is still relevant and appealing to a therapy-conscious contemporary society.

Joshua A. Berman is a professor in the Department of Bible at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. He is the author of *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2008), which was a National Jewish Book Award Finalist in Scholarship, and *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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# *The Book of Lamentations*



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על אלה אני בוכיה



*In memory of my great-grandmother Chaya-Esther Udovitch*

*Her daughter Menucha, son-in-law  
Yosef, and their three children*

*Her son Tanchun, and daughter-in-law  
Gita and their five children*

*who perished on the Ukrainian steppe at the hands of  
the Nazis and their collaborators, Sept. 14–16, 1941*

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## Supplements



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## Preface



To have the opportunity to share my interpretation of Lamentations within the framework of a major commentary series has been a dream of mine for more than two decades. I can hardly think of a forum that better fulfills my aspirations for this work than the New Cambridge Bible Commentary series and salute its commitment to biblical scholarship informed by rhetorical criticism, social scientific study of the scriptures, and narrative criticism and to bringing the fruits of this scholarship to a general audience. My heartfelt thanks therefore are expressed to the series general editor, Bill T. Arnold, for extending me an invitation to write this commentary. My thanks, also, to Beatrice Rehl and Kaye Barbaro at Cambridge University Press for their efforts in the production of this volume. Much of the material in my commentary to chapter 1 of Lamentations initially appeared in my study, “The Drama of Spiritual Rehabilitation in Lamentations 1,” *JBL* 140:3 (2021): 557–78, and my thanks to the journal for permission to reprint the material here.

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While at work on this commentary, in the summer of 2019, my son and I ventured to Romanivka, a ghost town two hundred kilometers east of Odessa in the vast expanse of the southern Ukrainian plains. Here deserted homes line the town’s only thoroughfare. These were the homes of the roughly one thousand Jews who lived in the town prior to the Second World War. The largest structure in the town is the hulking shell of its main synagogue, built to accommodate several hundred worshippers on two floors. We met Vladimir, a 93-year-old Ukrainian who recalled the names of the Jewish boys he played with as a teenager and several Yiddish phrases he had learned from them. Vladimir pointed us to the site of the mass grave where he had witnessed the execution of Romanivka’s Jews, one of whom

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had been my great-grandmother, Chaya-Esther Udovitch, who lived in the town in the final years of her life. Bubbe Esther was Bat-Zion; she endured starvation, the suffering of her children, later murdered, and here, at the mass grave of the Jews of Romanivka, a violent end.

What astonished me most, though, in our visit to Romanivka was the Russian inscription on the monument above the grave: “Here lie 1000 peaceful Soviet citizens who perished during the occupation.” There was no mention that these “peaceful Soviet citizens” happen to have all been Jews and that was why they were murdered. From my work on Lamentations, I knew that when lives are cut short by collective tragedy, their memory has an afterlife in which there is jockeying for the making of meaning – how their deaths are used, by whom and for what purpose. Here, the meaning was clear: the murder of Romanivka’s Jews would now serve in the strengthening of a pan-Soviet identity.

From Romanivka we journeyed some sixty kilometers to an equally small farming hamlet, Bobrov Kut, where my grandfather was born and raised. In the fields surrounding the town there is a giant well some twelve feet in diameter, now covered by concrete slabs. At the bottom of the well lie some nine hundred Jewish residents of Bobrov Kut, among them Esther’s youngest son, Tanchun, and his family. We met an elderly woman named Maryam, who sobbed and recalled that at the age of six she had been pulled out of the line at the well at the last moment because while her father was Jewish, her mother was Ukrainian. And here, too, we encountered a monument above the well lamenting the “peaceful Soviet citizens” who had perished in the occupation.

However, the greatest erasure of identity we witnessed was in the last stop on our journey, in Kherson, a city on the Black Sea, where Esther’s daughter, Menucha and family had lived. They were among its twelve thousand Jewish residents who were executed at a trench in a vast expanse of steppe on the outskirts of the city. But there is no current memory in Kherson of where this site is, though the best guess is that it lies beneath what is now a large field of solar panels. I was astonished that the earth could swallow up twelve thousand souls and that no one today can tell you where that happened.

To my grandfather’s mother, brother, sister, nephews, and nieces, I dedicate this volume and within its binding fulfill the words of the prophet (Isa 56:5 NKJV): “To them I will give in my house and within my walls a place and a name ... an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

## Suggested Readings



### COMMENTARIES

The following are the major commentaries on Lamentations cited in this volume:

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- Berlin, Adele. *Lamentations*. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
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- Wiesmann, Herman. *Die Klagelieder*. Frankfurt: Philosophisch-theologische Hochschule Sankt Georgen, 1954.

## MONOGRAPH STUDIES

Many of the works cited below effectively comment on large parts of Lamentations, yet without the format of a running commentary. Other works explore major themes central to the book of Lamentations.

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- Berrigan, Daniel. *Lamentations: From New York to Kabul and Beyond*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
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*Suggested Readings*

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- Rom-Shiloni, Dalit. *Voices from the Ruins: Theodicy and the Fall of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
- Thomas, Heath. *Poetry and Theology in the Book of Lamentations: The Aesthetics of an Open Text*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013.

FEMINIST STUDIES

The figure of Bat-Zion is one of the most evocative woman figures in the Hebrew Bible and recent decades have produced a wealth of insights on Lamentations from a feminist perspective:

- Brenner, Athalya and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes. *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1993.
- Day, Peggy. "The Personification of Cities as Female in the Hebrew Bible: The Thesis of Aloysius Fitzgerald, F.S.C." Pages 283–302 in volume II of *Reading from This Place*. Edited by Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
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## Abbreviations



AB	Anchor Bible
ABL	Harper, Robert F., ed. <i>Assyrian and Babylonian Letters Belonging to the Kouyunjik Collections of the British Museum</i> . 14 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1892–1914
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
ALFIHR	The Arnold and Leona Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research
ANET	Pritchard, James B., ed. <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
ANETS	Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BibInt	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAD	Gelb, Ignace J., et al. <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . 21 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
COS	Hallo, William W., and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds. <i>The Context of Scripture</i> . 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2016
EJSS	Eshkolot – Jewish Studies Series
Enc	<i>Encounter</i>

ET	English Translation
ETCSL	<i>Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature</i> (etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk)
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GKC	Kautzsch, Emil, ed., Cowley, Arthur E., trans. <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HBC	Mays, James L. et al., eds. <i>Harper's Bible Commentary</i> . San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HThKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JAJSup	Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
KJV	King James Version
KRI	Kitchen, K. A. <i>Ramesside Inscriptions, Historical and Biographical</i> . 8 vols. Oxford: Blackwell, 1969–1990
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
MC	Mesopotamian Civilizations
Midr.	Midrash
MJ	<i>Modern Judaism</i>
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
NCV	New Century Version
NIB	Keck, Leander E., ed. <i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> . 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004
NIBCOT	New International Bible Commentary on the Old Testament



*List of Abbreviations*

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NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The new JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NKJV	New King James Version
NPNF	Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, eds. <i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> . 28 vols. in 2 series. 1886–1889
NRSVue	New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition
OTL	Old Testament Library
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SLTHS	Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures
STL	Studia Theologica Lundensia
TAD	Porten, Bezael, and Ada Yardeni, eds. and trans. <i>Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt: Newly Copied, Edited and Translated into Hebrew and English by Bezael Porten and Ada Yardeni</i> . 4 vols. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, Department of the History of the Jewish People, 1986–1999
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TTS	Trierer Theologische Studien
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBBCS	Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries Series
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
YJS	Yale Judaica Series
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZBK	Zürcher Bibelkommentare