

## The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash\*

In a period of less than seventy years the Jews of antiquity lost three major wars: the great revolt of 66–74 C.E., the uprising of the Jews of Cyrenaica, Egypt, and Cyprus in 115–17 C.E., and the Bar Kokhba rebellion of 132–35 C.E. Each of these conflicts caused enormous losses in life (if we may believe our sources, over 1,400,000 dead) and property, and each had a major impact on Jewish history. In 70 C.E. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, thereby radically altering the map of Judaism. No longer did Judaism have a sacred center, a temple, a priesthood, and a sacrificial cult. The war of 115–17 C.E. marked the final eclipse of the “Golden Age” of Alexandrian Jewry. To punish the Jews for the Bar Kokhba insurrection, the Romans renamed the land of Israel “Palaestina,” forbade Jews to dwell in Jerusalem, now a pagan city, and proscribed the practice of Judaism for several years.

What was the reaction of the rabbis to these catastrophes? At first there was near silence. The rabbis of the tannaitic period (70–200 C.E.) did not write laments or seek refuge in apocalyptic dreams.<sup>1</sup> They did not establish new fast days. Nor did they accord a place in their curriculum to the study of these momentous events. While tannaitic corpora allude frequently to the destruction of the temple, they mention Beitar (the site of Bar Kokhba’s last stand) only once. They never mention the names of the leaders of the wars of 66–74, 115–17, and 132–35. They never mention Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s alleged role in the drama of the great revolt or Rabbi Akiva’s alleged endorsement of the messianic claims of Bar Kokhba. They seldom

\* Reprinted from *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 2 (1982) 18–39 with the kind permission of Indiana University Press. – With slight modifications translations of the Bible are taken from the new Jewish Publication Society version, and translations of Lamentations Rabbati are taken from *The Midrash Rabbah* edited by A. Cohen and published by Soncino press (1939). For all citations from Lam(entations) R(abbati) I give the page number of Buber’s edition (abbreviated B) and the page number of the Soncino translation (abbreviated S). I am grateful to the Abbell Publication Fund of the Jewish Theological Seminary for its support.

<sup>1</sup> Contrast the apocalypses of Baruch (extant in Syriac), Ezra (extant in Latin, called 2 Ezra or 4 Ezra), and John (in the New Testament). All of these were written between 70 and 100 C.E.

mention the Roman emperors who oppressed the Jews.<sup>2</sup> The nature of this tannaitic silence is not clear. Was it silence engendered by shock and despair? Not knowing what to say in the face of catastrophe, the rabbis said nothing. Or was it [19] silence engendered by determination? Ignoring the harsh political realities, the rabbis devoted their energies to creating a religious system which would ensure the survival of Judaism. However interpreted, the fact remains that the tannaim did not tell stories or preach sermons about the military disasters of their era. Instead they busied themselves with the production of books of law and exegesis. The study of history had to wait.

The silence was broken in the amoraic (200–400 C.E.) and post-amoraic (400–700 C.E.) periods. Now a safe distance from the catastrophes of a bygone age, the rabbis told numerous anecdotes and legends about the wicked Roman emperors (Vespasian, Titus, Trajan, and Hadrian) and the good Roman emperors (Antoninus), about the revolutionaries who led the Jews to defeat (Bar Kokhba, Bar Daroma, the *biryonim*), and about the rabbis who supported them (Rabbi Akiva) or opposed them (Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai). They preached sermons on the meaning of these events, concentrating upon the relationship of God to Israel and to the nations of the world. Anecdotes and sermons of this sort can be found throughout talmudic and post-talmudic literature, but are especially prominent in Lamentations Rabbati. The themes and message of this work are the subject of this essay.

Lamentations Rabbati (abbreviated Lam. R.) is a rabbinic commentary on the biblical book of Lamentations (abbreviated Lam.) written sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries. Extant in at least two different recensions, it has not yet merited a critical edition and frequently is obscure or corrupt. Nor is it a unity; it contains numerous repetitions and draws material from many sources. It is preceded by thirty-six proems, some, if not all, of which are not part of the original work. The midrash on the first two chapters of Lamentations is much longer than is the midrash on the last three chapters, suggesting that the original work treated only the first two chapters.<sup>3</sup> At some point, however, the book Lamentations Rabbati was formed and we are entitled to investigate its message even if various textual,

<sup>2</sup> Beitar: M. Taanit 4.6. Vespasian et al.: M. Sotah 9.14 and 17; Sifrei, Deuteronomy 328, p. 378 ed. Finkelstein; and elsewhere. I assume here that Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan and Seder Olam Rabbah are not tannaitic.

<sup>3</sup> On Lam. R. see J. Theodor, *Jewish Encyclopedia* 5 (1907) 85–87; Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstliche Vorträge der Juden*, ed. H. Albeck [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1947), pp. 78–79; Moshe Herr, *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10 (1971) 1376–78. The vulgate text of the midrash, translated in the Soncino edition, frequently differs from that of Buber (Vilna, 1899). Genizah fragments document a third, probably older, recension; see Tzevi Rabinowitz, *Ginze Midrash* (Tel Aviv, 1977), pp. 118–54. [On Lamentations Rabbati see the forthcoming edition and study by Paul (Pinhas) Mandel.] When quoting Lam. R. I do not always indicate the divergences between the texts of B and S.

philological and recensional problems remain unsolved.<sup>4</sup> Lamentations is a biblical response to adversity; Lamentations Rabbati is a rabbinic response. Are the responses similar one to the other? How do the major themes of Lamentations taken as a whole compare with those of Lamentations Rabbati taken as a whole?

### The Rabbinic Approach to Lamentations

The rabbis saw in Lamentations not a time-bound book describing the unique events of 587 B.C.E. but a timeless book setting forth the eternal paradigm of Jewish suffering. The rabbis knew very well that Lamentations was written as a reaction to specific historical events [20] (Lam. R. B 22a = S 69), but this realization was coupled with the belief that the book was the work of a prophet and that prophets speak eternal truths. For the rabbis Lamentations not only described the punishment meted out by God to the Jews in 587 B.C.E., it also prescribed the punishment which God would mete out in the future if the Jews would persist in their wickedness. The book is a lament for the past and a prophetic warning for the future much like the warning sermons of Moses (Lev. 26 and Deut. 28). Just as the Ninth of Av was a day of catastrophe for the Jews for all time, so too Lamentations, the liturgical reading for the Ninth of Av, was the eternal lament for all Jewish catastrophes, past, present, and future. According to the mishnah (Taanit 4:6) the Ninth of Av commemorates the punishment of the Israelites in the wilderness, the destruction of the first temple, the destruction of the second temple, and the fall of Beitar. According to Lamentations Rabbati the book of Lamentations speaks indiscriminately of the pain inflicted by Nebuchadnezzar, Vespasian, and Hadrian. A single verse might refer either to the death of Aaron or to the destruction of the temple (B 47a = S 145), a single chapter might refer both to the exile of the ten tribes and the jubilation of Rome and Caesarea (B 76b and 77a = S 230 and 234). In this timeless universe Nebuchadnezzar can consider attacking Alexandria and Rome before deciding to attack Jerusalem (B 10a = S 31). The narrator frequently does not bother to specify whether "the destruction of the temple" is that

<sup>4</sup> The same argument applies to the book of Lamentations, which may not be an organic composition written at one time. When I refer to "the author" of Lam. and Lam. R. I mean that person or group of persons responsible for our current text of those works. The rabbis, of course, had no doubt that Lam. was the work of one man, Jeremiah. In this essay I do not discuss the relationship of Lam. R. to other rabbinic works or place the theology of Lam. R. within rabbinic theology generally; nor do I catalogue the types of exegesis and literary forms employed by Lam. R.; nor do I present a complete thematic index to, and literary analysis of, Lam. and Lam. R.; nor do I treat the problematic passages of either work. These are important tasks for the future.

of the first or that of the second, and whether "the enemy" is Babylon or Rome. For him all the destructions and all the enemies are one; all are equally the subject of Lamentations. "There is no early and late in the Torah."<sup>5</sup>

Although the book of Lamentations is timeless, its primary frame of reference according to Lamentations Rabbati is the destruction of the first and second temples and the troubles of the Hadrianic era. (Medieval rabbis would add their own troubles to this list.<sup>6</sup>) Through prooftexts and anecdotes Lamentations Rabbati aims to show that the laments-warnings of Lamentations were fulfilled exactly. Readers of this journal hardly need a description of rabbinic prooftexting, the quotation of scriptural verses in order to illustrate some other verse or to prove a point under discussion. In Lamentations Rabbati anecdotes are adduced as regularly as prooftexts:

Rabbi Yohanan adduced sixty episodes to illustrate "The Lord has laid waste without pity" (Lam. 2:2), and Rabbi twenty four. (B 50b = S 157)

Presumably the episodes recounted by Rabbi and Rabbi Yohanan were independent stories which illustrated the ways by which God had "laid waste" (lit. "swallowed up") his people. Most of the anecdotes in Lamentations Rabbati are of this type, independent stories which are juxtaposed to the verse which they illustrate or "fulfill." Occasionally, [21] however, the scriptural verse actually produces the anecdote. Here are two examples:

It is related that the two children of Zadok the priest, one a boy and the other a girl, were taken captive, each falling to the lot of a different officer. One officer resorted to a harlot and gave her the boy for her fee. The other went to a storekeeper and gave him the girl for wine; to fulfill the text which is written, "And they bartered a boy for a whore, and sold a girl for wine" (Joel 4:3). (B 42a = S 127-28)

"They have ravished women in Zion" (Lam. 5:11). Nebuzaradan commanded his troops, saying, "The God of this people hates lewdness, so take care not to touch any married woman." When the [unmarried] women heard this, they went and said to a man, "We will eat our own food and clothe ourselves at our own expense, only let your name be attached to us." That is what is written, "In that day, seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, 'We will eat our own food and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name'" (Isaiah 4:1). [They all did this] except three women who were indifferent and were ravished. Therefore it is written, "They have ravished women [i.e., two women] in Zion, maidens in the towns of

<sup>5</sup> The process of interpreting non-prophetic sections of the Bible as if they were prophecies begins in the Bible itself. See e.g. Michael Fishbane, "Revelation and Tradition: Aspects of Inner-Biblical Exegesis," JBL 99 (1980) 343-61. On paradigmatic thought in the Bible and early apocalyptic see D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia, 1964), pp. 134-37 and 210-12; on paradigmatic thought in midrash, see Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhei ha'aggadah* [The Methods of the Aggadah] (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 32-34.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. the liturgical laments (*kinot*) for the Ninth of Av and the commentary ascribed to Rashi on 2 Chr. 35:25.

Judah" – the word for "maidens" is spelled so that it can be read "maiden" [i. e., one woman, for a total of three]. (B 79a = S 240)

The details of each anecdote are ingeniously derived from the verses which are quoted. Even more remarkable is the anecdote constructed on the basis of a verse which is not quoted:

(Nebuchadnezzar) sent Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, to destroy Jerusalem. He was occupied with the task for three years and a half. He daily encompassed Jerusalem but was unable to subdue it. He wished to return, but the Holy One, blessed be He, placed an idea in his mind, and he began to measure the wall which thereupon sank daily two and a half handbreadths until the whole of it was sunk in the ground. When it was wholly sunk, the enemy entered Jerusalem. With reference to that time it states, "The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or adversary could enter the gates of Jerusalem" (Lam. 4:12). (B 17a and 74b = S 56 and 226)

The progenitor of the sinking-wall motif surely is Lam. 2:9, "Her gates have sunk into the ground," although the verse is not quoted.<sup>7</sup>

To what extent does the rabbinic mode of exegesis distort the intent of Lamentations? No one will suggest that the author of Lamentations either knew anything about the Romans or wished the verses of his work to produce historical anecdotes, but it is not impossible that he interpreted the events of 587 B.C.E. paradigmatically. Just as the exodus from Egypt was the paradigm for all of God's salvific acts, an idea which frequently recurs in the Bible, the destruction of the temple may have been viewed by the author of Lamentations as the paradigm for all of God's punitive acts. His work contains no chronological data at all, no explicit references to Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, the last kings of Judah,<sup>8</sup> [22] and no explicit references to either Nebuchadnezzar or Babylon.<sup>9</sup> The history of Israel and the distinctive theology of Israel do not figure prominently in Lamentations.<sup>10</sup> The author

<sup>7</sup> Exegetically produced anecdotes are a phenomenon which requires further study. For a discussion, see Jacob Neusner, "From Exegesis to Fable," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974) 263–69.

<sup>8</sup> The only reference is the allusive "The breath of our life, the Lord's anointed" of 4:20.

<sup>9</sup> Lam. frequently refers to *tzar*, *tzarim*, *oyev*, *oyevim*, etc., just as Lam. R. frequently refers to *son'im*. Lam. does refer explicitly to Edom (4:21–22), Assyria, and Egypt (5:6).

<sup>10</sup> Lam. does not contrast the divine silence in 587 B.C.E. with the redemptive power exhibited by God at the exodus and at Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. The paradigmatic sinful cities are not Samaria and Shiloh (Jer. 26:4–6) but Sodom and Gomorrah (Lam. 4:6). Although it frequently mentions Jerusalem, Zion, Israel, and Jacob, and although it calls God YHWH rather than Elohim, Lam. does not refer to the creation of the world, the covenant at Sinai, the covenant with King David, or the temple cult (beyond the generalities of 2:6–7). The Sumerian laments for the destructions of Sumer and Ur do not share this relative universalism. For the texts see S.N. Kramer in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J.B. Pritchard (Princeton, 1969; 3rd edition), pp. 455–63 and 611–19.

includes at least one motif which was a commonplace already in the sixth century B.C.E. No siege story was complete without a mother eating her child.<sup>11</sup> By minimizing the specific historical connections of Lamentations, its author, like the authors of the laments found in the Psalter, may have been attempting to confront catastrophe as an absolute. He laments not only the fall of a lone city in 587 B.C.E. but also all falls from divine grace, all disasters inflicted by heaven upon a sinful humanity.<sup>12</sup> If this was his intention, the rabbinic approach to Lamentations is faithful to the implication of the work as a whole all the while it distorts the meaning of individual phrases and sentences.

### Specific Themes

The central themes of Lamentations Rabbati are identical with those of Lamentations: 1. the horrors of the destruction and the grandeur of what was destroyed; 2. the causes of the catastrophe; 3. God's justice; 4. Israel and the nations; 5. consolation and hope. Although the two works have identical interests, they have radically different emphases and conclusions. Lamentations is dominated by bitterness and despair, Lamentations Rabbati by consolation and hope. In order to promote its cheerful message while simultaneously maintaining its stance as a commentary on the biblical book, the midrash is forced occasionally to reinterpret, even to reverse, the message of Lamentations. Let us examine each of these themes separately.

#### *The Horror and the Grandeur*

The focus of both the biblical and the rabbinic laments is the destruction of Jerusalem, Israel's glory, pride, and beauty. Her destruction meant the starvation, enslavement, or death of her inhabitants. In consonance with the literary tastes of their age the rabbis describe the glory, pride, and beauty, as well as the starvation, enslavement, and death, in far greater detail and with far greater exaggerations than does the Bible. Compare Lam. 1:1; "Alas! Lonely sits the city once great with people," with the exegesis of R. Samuel:

There were twenty-four thoroughfares in Jerusalem. Each thoroughfare had twenty-four entrances; each entrance had twenty-four roads; each road had twenty-four

<sup>11</sup> Lam. 2:20 and 4:10; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 127–28.

<sup>12</sup> Brevard Childs has reached a similar conclusion (if I understand it correctly) through a different route; see his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 594 and 596.

streets; each street had twenty-four courts; each court had twenty-four houses; and each court had residents double the number of those who came out of Egypt. (B 22a–b = S 69)<sup>13</sup>

[23] According to R. Samuel's calculation Jerusalem's population was  $24^5 \times (2 \times 600,000)$  which is approximately nine and a half trillion. The midrash provides another estimate too, a more modest sixty million. The fortress of Beitar was tiny by comparison; its minimum number of school children was only one hundred and fifty thousand.<sup>14</sup> All of Jerusalem's attributes are similarly magnified. Her reputation among the nations, also mentioned in Lam. 1:1 ("She that was great among nations ... the princess among states"), is the subject of a long string of anecdotes which we shall treat below. No detail was too trivial for this sort of treatment. From Lamentations' sole allusion to the food habits of the Jerusalemites ("Those who feasted on dainties lie famished in the street," 4:5) Lamentations Rabbati deduced that the Jerusalemites of old excelled in the social graces and the culinary arts. They ate only the finest foods, including white bread and vintage wine, and followed a strict code of etiquette. Jerusalem before its fall was the paragon of urbanity and elegance.<sup>15</sup>

Lamentations Rabbati raises the heights and lowers the depths. Lamentations devotes several verses to the graphic description of the effects of the famine on the people of Jerusalem ("All her inhabitants sigh as they search for bread; they have bartered their treasures for food to keep themselves alive," 1:11).<sup>16</sup> In its commentary on these verses Lamentations Rabbati describes the starvation of specific people and stresses the before-and-after contrast.<sup>17</sup>

It is related of Miriam, the daughter of Nakdimon, that the rabbis allowed her five hundred gold dinars daily to be spent on her store of perfumes. Nevertheless she stood up and cursed them, saying, "Make such a [paltry] allowance for your own daughters!" R. Aha said, "We responded with 'Amen!'" R. Eleazar said, "May I not live to behold the consolation [of Zion] if I did not see her gathering barley from beneath horses' hoofs in Acco." (B 43b–44a = S 129)

<sup>13</sup> B omits the  $(2 \times 600,000)$ .

<sup>14</sup> B 23a = S 71; B 52b = S 161 (in B Beitar had over 250,000 children); cf. too B. 53a–54b = S 162–63. In general see Juda Bergmann, "Die runden und hyperbolischen Zahlen in der Agada," *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 82 (1938) 361–76.

<sup>15</sup> Foods: B 59a = S 179; B 73a = S 220; B 65a–66a = S 196–98. Etiquette: B 71a–71b = S 216 and 218–19. The prominence of this peculiar theme in Lam. R. was pointed out to me by Alan Mintz. Why it should be so prominent, I cannot say. Jerusalem was also a great place for business, B 22b = S 69–70 and B 60a = S 182.

<sup>16</sup> See too 1:19; 2:11–12, 19–20; 4:4–5, 8–10; 5:9–10.

<sup>17</sup> See Lam. R. on the verses listed in n. 16.

In Lamentations mothers eat their children; in Lamentations Rabbati mothers eat their children and a son eats his father (B 41b = S 126–27). In Lamentations "young men must carry millstones" (5:13); in Lamentations Rabbati the captives are subjected to sexual abuse and are murdered (B 79a = S 241). Everywhere in Lamentations Rabbati the pain and suffering exceed what is described by Lamentations.

None of this is particularly remarkable. By exaggerating figures, by inventing details, and by intensifying the impact of the text it was considering, Lamentations Rabbati follows the canons of rabbinic midrash. However, there are two areas of remarkable continuity between Lamentations Rabbati and Lamentations where the midrashic process was not given free reign. In these two subjects the author of Lamentations Rabbati was either unwilling or unable to depart from the path set for him by Lamentations.

[24] First, although both works lament the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of the temple, neither is bothered by the cessation of the sacrificial cult. It was said that Rabbi Joshua, upon seeing the temple in ruins, asked his master Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai how Israel could obtain atonement without the sacrificial cult (Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan 4), but this problem did not exercise our authors. For them the blood of rams was not essential for communication between man and God. Like the prophets Lamentations Rabbati has God declare that Israel relied excessively on the sacrificial cult (B 57a = S 174). The nations of the world, mindful of the sacrifices which were offered daily on their behalf during Sukkoth, were fearful when the sacrifices ceased (B 30b = S 95), but nowhere in Lamentations Rabbati are the Jews afflicted with a similar fear. Israel laments the loss of the cult (B 44a = S 134) and yearns for the good old days when priests and Levites properly performed their duties (B 13a = S 40), but these two statements do not affect the overall pattern. The explanation for this amazing rabbinic silence, which is even more amazing than the biblical silence, is provided by the following comment:

"A Psalm of Asaph. O God, heathens have entered your domain, defiled your holy temple" (Ps. 79:1) ... People said to Asaph, "The Holy one, blessed be He, has caused temple and sanctuary to be destroyed, and you sit singing a psalm!" He replied to them, "I sing a psalm because the Holy One, blessed be He, poured out his wrath upon wood and stone and not upon Israel." (B 74b = S 224)

For the authors of both Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbati the temple building, a collection of wood and stone, was dispensable. Even the sacrificial cult was dispensable. But the temple was more than a building and more than the home of the sacrificial cult. It was the sacred center of the cosmos, the place where heaven and earth meet, the visible symbol of God's love for Israel. The loss of this symbol meant disorientation and despair – did God

still love Israel? Has God abandoned his people? These questions as we shall see, and not the loss of the sacrificial cult, are the major concerns of both Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbati.<sup>18</sup>

Second, while both works mourn the slain, only Lamentations Rabbati mourns the death of martyrs, a category of victims unknown to the biblical book. The longest martyrological text is the story of the mother and her seven sons, transferred by Lamentations Rabbati in its typical ahistorical fashion from the period of Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc. 7) to that of Hadrian (B 42b–43a = S 130–33). Shorter texts include the suicide of captives who are being taken to Rome for service in houses of prostitution (B 41a–b = S 124–25)<sup>19</sup> and a brief reference to the ten martyrs of the Hadrianic period (B 50b = S 157). Although martyrdom is closely connected with the question of theodicy, a central concern of [25] the midrash, Lamentations Rabbati devotes relatively little attention to it. Had he wished, the author could have incorporated many more rabbinic martyrologies,<sup>20</sup> thereby according the theme the prominence it deserves, but he did not. For an unknown reason few martyrs and martyrdoms sanctify the pages of Lamentations Rabbati. Here is another case where the midrashic process of supplementing and reinterpreting was not carried to its potential conclusion.

### *The Causes of the Catastrophe*

Why were the first and second temples destroyed? Why did Bar Kokhba fail? The standard Jewish response to such questions, “It was because of our sins,” is well articulated by both Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbati, as we shall see in a moment, but the midrash also has a very different approach. The fault is the Romans’, not ours; they do not understand us and they hate us.

A Jew passed in front of Hadrian and greeted him. The king asked, “Who are you?” He answered, “I am a Jew.” He exclaimed, “Dare a Jew pass in front of Hadrian and greet him?” He ordered, “Take him and cut off his head.” Another Jew passed, and seeing what had happened to the first man, did not greet him. The king asked, “Who are you?” He answered, “A Jew.” He exclaimed, “Dare a Jew pass in front of Hadrian without giving greeting?” He ordered, “Take him and cut off his head.” His senators said to him, “We cannot understand your actions. He who greeted you was killed, and he who did not greet you was killed.” He replied to them, “Do you seek to advise me how I wish to kill those I hate?” (B 69b–70a = S 211)

<sup>18</sup> This attitude towards the sacrificial cult characterizes the tannaitic, rather than the amoraic and post-amoraic, period. See Shaye Cohen, “The Temple and the Synagogue,” [*Cambridge History of Judaism volume III*, ed. Horbury, Davies, and Sturdy (1999), pp. 298–325].

<sup>19</sup> A topos? Cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.12.4.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the anthology of martyr stories in Semahot (the tractate “Mourning”) 8. At B 69a = S 209 Lam. R. has a fragment of the story of the martyrdom of R. Akiva.

Similarly Hadrian first killed Jews who were hirsute and then those who were bald (B 78a = S 238).

The Romans also misunderstand the Jews and their customs. What was the cause of the war of 115–17 C.E.?

The wife of Trajan the accursed gave birth to a child on the night of the ninth of Av while all the Jews were mourning. The child died on Hanukkah. The Jews said, “Shall we kindle the lights or not?” They decided to light them and risk the consequences. They lit the candles and persons slandered them to Trajan’s wife, saying, “When your child was born the Jews mourned, and when it died they kindled lights!” She sent a letter to her husband, “Instead of subduing the barbarians, come and subdue the Jews who have revolted against you.” (B 42a and 76b = S 127 and 231–32)<sup>21</sup>

In these stories the sinfulness of the Jews, divine punishment, God’s employment of the Romans as his agents, and the like play no role. The narrator ignores God and emphasizes instead that the Romans maltreated the Jews out of ignorance and irrational hatred. The author of Lamentations Rabbati was capable of seeing the catastrophe in purely [26] human terms, but this perspective, which has close analogies in Greco-Roman historiography,<sup>22</sup> remained undeveloped. It was not until the dawn of modernity in the sixteenth century that the Jews began to interpret history according to the canons of secular historiography. (For example, Solomon ibn Verga suggested that the expulsion of the Jews from Spain was caused by the Spaniards’ jealousy of the Jews’ economic prosperity.) As a pre-modern religious Jew, the author of Lamentations Rabbati perceives historical causality in terms of divine reward and punishment.

Lamentations clearly interprets the catastrophe of 587 B.C.E. as God’s punishment of Israel for her sins.

The Lord is in the right,  
For I have disobeyed him. (1:18)  
We have transgressed and rebelled,  
And you have not forgiven. (3:42)  
Woe to us that we have sinned! (5:16)

Lamentations Rabbati follows this approach. Fourteen of the thirty-six poems to the book close with the phrase “since they sinned, they were exiled,” and at least three others close with equivalent admissions of guilt. The midrash affirms that good befalls the doer of good, and evil befalls the doer of evil (B 68a = S 206). The Jews were so wicked that not even Abra-

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the Kamza-Bar Kamza story (B 71b–72a = S 216–19). In both of these stories the Jews are aware that the Romans might misinterpret one of their observances, but decide to follow it anyway.

<sup>22</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, “Some Observations on the Causes of War in Ancient Historiography,” *Studies in Historiography* (N.Y., 1966), pp. 112–26.

ham, the intercessor par excellence, was able to plead successfully on their behalf (B 28b = S 87).

Not content with Lamentations' general admissions of guilt, Lamentations Rabbati even specifies which sins the Jews violated:

Israel did not go into exile until they had repudiated the divine unity, the decalogue, circumcision which had been given to the twentieth generation, and the Pentateuch. Whence do we derive this? From the letters constituting the word *ekhab* [Alas!, the first Hebrew word of the book]. (B 21a = S 66)

Rabbi Yudan said, "Jerusalem was destroyed only because of neglect of the Torah." ... Rabbi Isaac said, "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they made the great and the small equal." ... Rabbi Hamnuna said, "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they forced the young students of elementary school to neglect [their studies]." ... Ulla said, "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they were not ashamed one of the other." ... Rabbi Amram said, "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they did not chastise each other." (B 46b-47a; not in S 144)

The rabbis often labeled one particular sin as *the* cause for the destruction of Jerusalem, Beitar, or whatever.<sup>23</sup> These statements were not historical analyses concerning the past so much as they were sermons for righteous conduct in the present. Cf. the following:

Mount Simeon [an unknown fortress] used to distribute three hundred *garab* of wafers among the poor every Friday. And why was it destroyed? [27] ... R. Huna said, "because they used to play with a ball on the Sabbath." ... The taxes of three cities, Kabul, Shihin, and Magdala, [were so heavy that they] had to be carried to Jerusalem in a wagon. Why were they destroyed? Kabul because of dissension, Shihin because of magic, and Magdala because of illicit sex. (B 53b = S 162)

Once upon a time four towns were wealthy and powerful and now they are destroyed. Why? It is very possible that the author of this story believed that Kabul et al. were destroyed because of their dissension and other sins, but surely R. Huna's comment should not be understood as an essay in historical causality. No one knew why Mount Simeon fell, but its fall was a wonderful pretext for a sermon against playing ball on the Sabbath.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> B 31b = S 97 and B 52a = S 160; B. Yoma 9a; Shabbat 119b; BM 30b; Mekhilta on Exod. 19:1 (pp. 203-4 ed. Horovitz).

<sup>24</sup> The parallel text in Y. Taanit 4.8 (69a) omits "on the Sabbath" and this is probably the original reading. Later scholars, disturbed by the severity of a prohibition against ball-playing (see the commentaries in the Yerushalmi ad loc.; is "ball" here a gambling device?), added "on the Sabbath." For another case where "on the Sabbath" was added by later commentators to a phrase which puzzled them, see Saul Lieberman, "The Martyrs of Caesarea," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 7 (1939-44) 418 n. 10. [For discussion see Boaz Zissu, "The Hellenistic Fortress at Horvat Tura and the Identification of Tur Shimon," *Israel Exploration Journal* 58 (2008) 171-194, esp. 186-187.]

While both Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbati ascribe guilt to the Jews generally, both works also single out the leadership for special opprobrium:

Your seers prophesied to you  
Delusion and folly,  
They did not expose your iniquity  
So as to restore your fortunes. (Lam. 2:14; cf. 2:9)  
It was the sins of her prophets,  
The iniquities of her priests,  
Who had shed in her midst  
The blood of the just. (Lam. 4:13)

Lamentations accuses the prophets and the priests. Lamentations Rabbati accuses the sicarii and Bar Kokhba, the revolutionaries who fomented war and presided over Israel's destruction. The sicarii were crazed fanatics who burned the storehouses of food and brought famine upon the populace. The narrator tells us nothing about their noble aspirations for freedom, their idealistic attempt to rid the holy land of a pagan presence, and their loyalty to God, Israel, and the Torah. For Lamentations Rabbati the hero of the war of 66-74 C.E. is Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who defected from Jerusalem and hailed Vespasian as king. Somewhat ill at ease with ben Zakkai's role in the war, our midrash emphasizes that the rabbi was not a traitor (in no other version of the story does Rabban Yohanan ask Vespasian to spare the temple and forgive the Jews), but even in Lamentations Rabbati it is clear that the villains are the revolutionaries and the hero is the collaborator (B 33a-35a = S 101-05).

Bar Kokhba was not much better than the Sicarii. True, he was endorsed by Rabbi Akiva, but his antics caused him to be criticized by the rabbis. He even murdered R. Eleazar haModa'i, a rabbi who, like Rabban Yohanan, was innocent of any treasonous conduct (B 51a-52a = S 157-59).<sup>25</sup> Just as the Jews slew the prophet Zechariah in the time of the first temple, the saintly Honi haMe'agel in the time of the downfall of the Maccabees, and the pious priest Ananus ben Ananus during the [28] war of 66-70 C.E., so too Bar Kokhba slew the pious rabbi Eleazar haModa'i. Each of these murders incurred the wrath of God and doomed the combatants to defeat.<sup>26</sup> Thus the revolutionary leaders of the Jews were sinners and fools, but even

<sup>25</sup> R. Eleazar's innocence and Bar Kokhba's guilt are greater in Lam. R. than in Y. Taanit 68d. There the Samaritan accuses R. Eleazar of collaboration with the Romans; in Lam. R. Bar Kokhba suspects the rabbi on his own.

<sup>26</sup> Zechariah: 2 Chr. 24:20-22; Lam. R. B 10b-11a = S 32-34; B 54b = S 163-65; B 74b-75a = S 226-28. Honi: Josephus, AJ 14.22-25. Ananus: Josephus, BJ 4.314-325. This motif needs further study. One aspect is analyzed by Odil Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967).

the rabbinic leaders failed them in the hour of need (Is this how Lam. R. understood Lam. 2:9, "Torah is no more"?). Lamentations Rabbati heightens the insensitivity, almost stupidity, of Rabbi Zechariah ben Eucolus who insisted that some halakhic minutiae be observed in a situation where common sense and self-preservation demanded that they be waived temporarily (B 71b–72a = S 216–18). "The meekness of Zechariah b. Eucolus burnt the temple."<sup>27</sup>

### God's Justice

Although both Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbati conclude that the sufferings of the Jews are condign punishment wrought by a just God upon a sinful people, neither work is an unalloyed affirmation of divine justice. Each raises questions about theodicy.

Aside from the third chapter Lamentations concentrates almost exclusively on the destruction itself and does not engage in theological reflections. Nowhere does the author argue with God. Nowhere does he deny divine control of human affairs. He is a man of simple faith: sin is followed by punishment, punishment presupposes sin. "Our fathers sinned and are no more; and we must bear their guilt" (5:7) is not a complaint but an acknowledgement of God's justice. Israel bears the accumulated guilt of generations and must pay the price.<sup>28</sup> Only once does he cry, "Why have you forgotten us utterly, forsaken us this long time?" (5:20). He fears that the Lord may have punished and then abandoned. Hasn't God punished his people enough? Isn't it time for mercy to reassert itself and for God to look to his people again? The author is hopeful but uncertain. Corresponding to this lone plaintive cry is a lone declaration of optimism for the future: the worst is over (4:21–22). Nowhere does he affirm that the Lord will restore what he has destroyed. Lacking explicit denials and affirmations of divine justice, chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 yield an ill-defined picture: discouragement without despair, hope without assurance. In chapter 3 the suppressed denials and affirmations become explicit. Like Job this author is torn between the harsh realities he has experienced and the faith he hopes to maintain. First his denial of divine justice:

I am the man who has known affliction under the rod of his wrath; me he drove on and on in unrelieved darkness; on none but me he brings down his hand again and

<sup>27</sup> In Lam. R. Rabbi Zechariah is guilty on two counts: he neglects to protect Bar Kamza from embarrassment at a dinner party; he insists that the laws regarding blemished sacrifices be obeyed no matter what the consequences may be. The parallel version in B. Gittin 55b–56a omits the first point (which explains the comment about "meekness").

<sup>28</sup> Many commentators agree on this point. See e.g. Delbert Hillers, *Lamentations* (N. Y., 1972; The Anchor Bible), p. 104. The author of Kings saw nothing wrong with this theology; contrast Jer. 31 and Ezek. 18.

again without cease. He has worn away my flesh and skin; he has shattered my bones. All around me he has built misery and hardship; [29] he has made me dwell in darkness, like those long dead. He has walled me in and I cannot break out; he has weighed me down with chains. And when I cry and plead, he shuts out my prayer. (3:1–8)

He continues in this vein for ten more verses. Like Job (e.g. Job 9–10) the author complains not that God has abandoned him but that God actively persecutes him. A malevolent and baneful deity, God inflicts suffering upon the innocent and the helpless – no reference to sin here! This tirade against God is followed immediately by a declaration of faith:

The kindness of the Lord has not ended, his mercies are not spent. They are renewed every morning – ample is your grace! "The Lord is my portion," I say with full heart; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good to those who trust in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait in silence till rescue comes from the Lord ... For the Lord does not reject forever, but first afflicts, then pardons in his abundant kindness. (3:22–26 and 31–32)

This theme continues until verse 39. Such juxtapositions jar the modern eye but are common in the Bible, especially the Psalms. Chapter 3 of Lamentations makes explicit the theological tension which is implicit in the rest of the book.

In Lamentations Rabbati we have a complexity akin to that of Lam. 3. By the time the midrash was written only Gnostics maintained that the God of this world was a wicked being who sported with men and delighted in their suffering. The rabbis in Lamentations Rabbati did not have to counter such a theology. For them the agonizing dilemma was not God's malevolence but God's silence. Had he abandoned his people? The author of Lamentations was already impatient with the slowness of God in changing from anger to mercy, but for Lamentations Rabbati this feeling was intensified by added years of pain. The second temple was built seventy years after the destruction of the first, but hundreds of years had already elapsed since the destruction of the second – where was the third? Even worse, pagans and Christians laughed at the Jews. Pagans argued that the abject state of the Jews proved that their religion is false. To this argument the Christians added the idea that God rejected the Jews when the Jews rejected Jesus.<sup>29</sup> Compare the fortunes of the Jews with the fortunes of the Romans and the Christians. Who

<sup>29</sup> The pagan argument, which first appears in Cicero, was advanced by Celsus in the second century and by Julian in the fourth; see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem, 1974–1984), no. 375 (vol. 2 pp. 257//286 and 263//292–93) (Celsus) and no. 481a (pp. 523//538–39) (Julian). The Christian argument against the Jews appears throughout early Christian literature. See Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980) 567–95, esp. 588–94. The common biblical motif "What will the nations say?" (e.g. Exod. 32:12 and Ps. 79:10) is developed not by Lam. but by Lam. R.



would not conclude that God abandoned his people? Even the rabbis could speak of the departure of the divine presence (*siluk hashekhinah*) from Israel at the destruction (B 44a = S 134). Consequently the issue of God's abandonment could not be dismissed with simple affirmations that "God has not abandoned and will not abandon" (B 29b = S 91; B67b = S 205). It required a discussion of the relationship between the Jews and the nations.

### *Israel and the Nations*

[30] Why has God punished Israel but left the nations unpunished?

David spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He, "Master of the universe! Why is it that all those who love you [i. e. the Jews] are poor and their servants [i. e. the nations] are wealthy? ... Why is it that all those who love you are distraught and their servants are at ease? ... Why is it that all those who love you are weak and their servants are healthy?" (B 56a; not in S 170)

The rabbis said, "Israel spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'We are yours and the heathen peoples are yours; why do you have no pity upon your people?'" (S 236; not in B 77b) "Jerusalem has greatly sinned" (Lam. 1:8). Do the heathen nations, then, not sin? But although they sin, it has no sequel in punishment. Israel, however, sinned and were punished. (B 36a = S 109)

The relative status of the Jews and the nations not only exemplifies the adage "the righteous man suffers while the wicked man prospers," it also demonstrates Israel's loyalty to God. The nations want Israel to abandon her God and to assimilate, arguing that God has already abandoned her, but Israel remains loyal:

The heathens vex Israel by saying to them, "Your God has hidden his face from you and removed his presence from your midst. He will return to you no more. [B adds: Come among us and we shall appoint you generals and commanders and chiefs.]" They weep and sigh ... In the time to come when the era of the redemption arrives, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to Israel, "My sons, I wonder how you waited for me all these years." And they will speak before him, "Master of the universe, had it not been for your Torah which you have given us, the heathen peoples would long ago have caused us to stray." (B 66b = S 200)<sup>30</sup>

The Jews know that they could intermarry and thereby end their pain (B 47a-b = S 145-46). Because of their loyalty to the commandments they suffer in exile (B 31b = S 96-97). Because of their distinctiveness they are the butt of jokes at circus performances (B 7b and 64a = S 22-23 and 194).<sup>31</sup> When one whore seeks to insult another, the worst epithet she can pronounce is "Jewess!" (B 38a = S 117).

<sup>30</sup> Instead of "to stray," S. translates "to perish" which is incorrect. B's addition derives from Pesikta de Rav Kahana p. 306 ed. Mandelbaum. For the phrase "come among us," cf. "come assimilate with us" in Mekhilta p. 127 ed. Horovitz.

<sup>31</sup> Jews should not attend performances at the circus (B 3a = S 6).

Lamentations too is aware of the mocking which Israel must endure among the nations (1:7 and 21; 5:1; cf. 1:5, 2:17, and 3:14), but the existential contrast between Israel and the nations is much more central to the midrash than to the biblical book. Why does God allow the nations to prosper for so long? Lamentations Rabbati has no answer.<sup>32</sup>

Scripture and midrash share the belief that at some point in the future God will punish the nations. Both works also believe that the [31] nations were merely agents through whom God punished his people. How can these beliefs be combined? Can an agent be punished for doing his master's will? Did the nations have a choice in their actions? There is a complex biblical legacy on this subject, but in order to understand Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbati I adduce only two responses here: Isaiah 10 and Jeremiah 25. According to Isaiah God appointed Assyria to be his "rod of anger" but Assyria, while fulfilling this commission, sinned on two counts. It acted with undue cruelty, intending to destroy what God wanted subdued, and it believed that its success was due to its own power and not to God's. God therefore shall destroy Assyria (Isaiah 10:5-19). According to Jeremiah God appointed Babylonia to punish the people of Judah. After seventy years Babylonia in turn will be punished, not because of its cruelty and arrogance, not because it attacked the Jews, but because it sinned. God will requite the Babylonians "according to their acts and according to their conduct" (Jeremiah 25:12-14).

Lamentations combines the responses of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Like Jeremiah, Lamentations declares that a day will come when the Lord will note the sins of Edom and will punish accordingly (4:21-22). By subtle juxtaposition the author also suggests that the enemies of Israel are guilty of the sins attributed by Isaiah to Assyria:

All your enemies jeer at you; they hiss and gnash their teeth, and cry: "We've ruined her! Ah, this is the day we hoped for; we have lived to see it!" The Lord has done what he purposed, has carried out the decree that he ordained long ago; he has torn down without pity. He has let the foe rejoice over you, has exalted the might of your enemies. (2:16-17)

The enemies shout "We've ruined her!" but it is the Lord who has done it.

Lamentations Rabbati of course would agree with Jeremiah that God will ultimately punish the nations for their own sins, but the basic viewpoint of the midrash is that of Isaiah. The nations acted with unjustifiable cruelty towards Israel (B 14b = S 48 and B 37a = S 112; cf. B 78b = S 239-40). They

<sup>32</sup> Lam. R. also includes the famous legend in which God offered the Torah to many nations but was rebuffed by all of them except Israel. Hence Israel's claim on God is greater than that of the nations (B 13b = S 44-45; B 61b-62a = S 189).



think that God abandoned the Jews (B 66b = S 200) and do not realize that their victory is the result of divine support.

"From above he sent a fire down into my bones" (Lam. 1:13). R. Joshua said, "[this verse explains] the rebuke which the prophet addressed to [Babylon], 'Grasp the handmill and grind meal' (Isaiah 47:2). Everyone grinds wheat and yet it says 'Grind meal! The meaning, however, is: Jerusalem said to the daughter of Babylon, 'Had they not fought against me on high, would you have been able to fight me? Had they not sent fire against me from on high, could you have conquered me? Only a slain lion have you killed, ground meal have you ground, a burnt city did you set ablaze!' Therefore is it stated, 'From above he sent a fire down into my bones.'" (B 38b = S 120–21)<sup>33</sup>

[32] The nations do not realize that they are the agents of God who could have employed bears, wolves, scorpions, and other noxious creatures to do his bidding against the Jews. Because they do not realize this, God will punish them (B 43a = S 132).

In the meanwhile, before the messianic deliverance and the discomfiture of the nations, Lamentations Rabbati urges the Jews to show disdain for gentile kindnesses and favors, and to remain confident that they are superior to the nations. Israel's disdain for gentile favors is evident in the story of Vespasian and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. In the other three versions of the story Rabban Yohanan obtains "Yavneh and her sages" as a favor from the soon-to-be emperor. In the version of the Babylonian Talmud Rabban Yohanan obtains two other requests besides for a total of three. In Lamentations Rabbati, however, Yavneh is not mentioned. Rabban Yohanan makes three requests of Vespasian but Yavneh is not one of them. He asks Vespasian to abandon the siege; the request is denied. He asks Vespasian to leave the western gate unobstructed to allow free egress to all those who wish to escape; we are not told whether the request is granted. He asks that Rabbi Zadok be rescued, and the request is granted. In the Babylonian Talmud Rabban Yohanan makes and obtains three requests; in Lamentations Rabbati he makes three and obtains one, perhaps two. In the other three versions of the story the preservation and continuation of rabbinic Judaism are the gift of the Romans to a Jewish collaborator; Lamentations Rabbati tacitly denies this by omitting Yavneh from the story (B 33a–35a = S 101–05).<sup>34</sup> Let Jews rely on themselves. As the midrash declares in another context, "Why should I learn this [the time of the birth of the Messiah] from an Arab when there is an explicit [biblical] text?" (B 45a = S 136).

<sup>33</sup> In one set of stories the emperor Hadrian recognizes that it was God, and not a Roman soldier, who killed Bar Kokhba (B 52a = S 159 and B 53a = S 161).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. B. Gitin 56a–b. In Lam. R. B 34b Rabban Yohanan rescues "all the rabbis" (contrast S 104), not just R. Zadok.

The superiority of Israel is the point of the long section on the sages of Athens and Jerusalem. On the verse "great among nations ... princess among states" (Lam. 1:1), the midrash comments:

"Great" in intellect. R. Huna said, "Wherever a Jerusalemite went in the provinces, they arranged a seat of honor for him to sit upon in order to listen to his wisdom." (B 23b = S 73)

This is illustrated by eleven stories, the first three of which concern Jerusalemites in Athens, the next seven concern Athenians in Jerusalem, and the eleventh concerns an Athenian in Jerusalem and a Jerusalemite in Athens. By verbal and thematic association the narrator continues with two stories concerning Samaritans and four stories concerning various rabbis.<sup>35</sup> The first eleven stories, which are the only ones of the corpus to illuminate the verse "great among nations," demonstrate the superior wit, cleverness, and ingenuity of the Jerusalemites. Although these stories are remarkably secular and humorous, and although they are closely paralleled by the folktales of many [33] nations,<sup>36</sup> they clearly have a serious purpose within Lamentations Rabbati. A similar type of tale was inserted in the Yohanan ben Zakkai saga, hardly the place for frivolity (B 34a = S 102). By demonstrating the superiority of Jerusalem to Athens and of Israel to the nations, these stories console the Jews during the long dark period of gentile dominance. Jerusalem and the temple have been lost, but the intelligence and the wit of the Jews remain.<sup>37</sup>

### Consolation and Hope

Lamentations is a bleak book. Devoted almost exclusively to lamenting the destroyed and bemoaning the past, its gloom is rarely lightened by hope and optimism. The author prays for a better future but his hopes usually remain in the optative mood, not the indicative. Chapter 3, with its confessions of despair and affirmations of confidence, prefigures to some extent the outlook of Lamentations Rabbati. We have already seen that the midrash is not entirely satisfied with divine justice. In particular it is mystified by the triumph of the nations. But unlike the author of Lamentations, the author of Lamentations Rabbati set out to write a book which would not only la-

<sup>35</sup> This is the order of the stories in B; it is different in S.

<sup>36</sup> Secular: E. E. Halevy, *Ha'aggadah habistorit biografit* [The Historical-Biographical Aggadah] (Tel Aviv, 1975), p. 206. The heroes are Jerusalemites, not Jews; the stories do not refer at all to Jewish ritual laws (e.g. kashrut). Folktales: Haim Schwarzbaum, *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (Berlin, 1968), pp. 204–21, 234, and 474. [See now Galit Has-an-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford, 2000).]

<sup>37</sup> Cf. too B 2a = S 3–4. Lam. R. does not say that the nations are stupid. "Should a person tell you there is wisdom among the nations, believe it" (B 57b = S 176).

ment the past but also give consolation for the present and confidence for the future. This goal is achieved by the folktales just discussed and by the following three themes: the messiah and the messianic future; God's participation in the suffering of the Jews; the reversal of Lamentations.

The messiah, the messianic era, the world to come, resurrection, future judgment, and ultimate retribution are theological certainties for the author of Lamentations Rabbati which make the future secure and the present tolerable. When Lamentations was written these comforting doctrines circulated among the Jews only in inchoate form, if at all, but by the time Lamentations Rabbati was written they were accepted by almost all Jews. In the messianic future/world-to-come, the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished, Israel will be glorified and the nations will be discomfited. Lamentations Rabbati speaks of these things many times (e.g. B 44b–45b = S 135–38 and B 55b = S 168).

Eschatology inspires confidence but one must still bridge the gap between the immediate present and the far off day of the eschaton. We have seen that Lamentations Rabbati assures the Jews that "God has not abandoned nor will he abandon" them, and this assurance was brought to life by the beautiful rabbinic idea that God suffers when his people suffer. Like the prophets the rabbis regularly spoke of God as a being endowed with human form and emotions. After the destruction of the temple, and probably as a reaction to it, the rabbis said that God shares with the Jews the pain of the catastrophe.<sup>38</sup> This theology figures [34] prominently in Lamentations Rabbati.<sup>39</sup> Not only does God go into exile with the Jews, he even cries with them and for them:

"Bitterly she weeps in the night" (Lam. 1:2). She weeps and makes others to weep with her. [A play on the duplication *Bakboh tivkeb*.] Thus, she weeps and makes the Holy One, blessed be He, to weep with her ... She weeps and makes the ministering angels to weep with her. (B 30a = S 94)

Just as a human king mourns the death of his son, God mourns the destruction of Jerusalem (B 21b–22a = S 67–68 and B 67a = S 203–4). It is God, not Jeremiah or the people of Israel, who recites that plaintive verse from Jeremiah (8:23), "Oh, that my head were water, my eyes a fount of tears! Then would I weep day and night for the slain of my poor people" (B 39b–40a = S 138 and B 40b = S 140). Who is the "I" of "For these things do I weep" (Lam. 1:16)? It is the holy spirit (B 41b–43a = S 125–33).

<sup>38</sup> Peter Kuhn, *Gottes Trauer und Klage in der rabbinischen Überlieferung* (Leiden, 1978).

<sup>39</sup> B 19b = S 63; B 35a–b = S 105–6; B 46b = S 144 (the texts differ); B 55b–56a = S 169–70; B 79a (mutilated in S 240–41).

When the midrash has God or the holy spirit cry out a verse from Lamentations, it is not just advancing a poetic theology, it is reversing the intent of the biblical book. No longer a book of laments written by a man about the suffering inflicted (whether justly or not) on his people by his God, Lamentations is now a book recited by God bemoaning the suffering he inflicted on his people! Interpreted in this fashion, a collection of dirges and laments becomes a source of consolation since it is God himself who is reciting the dirges and the laments. Similarly, verses of Lamentations originally intended to show Israel's desolation become, through creative exegesis, promises of hope:

"There is none to comfort her" (Lam. 1:2). R. Levi said, "Wherever it says 'there is none' (*en lab*) it indicates that there would be in the future. 'And Sarai was barren, without (*en lab*) child' (Gen. 11:30) but she did have one later ... Similarly, 'But Hannah had no (*en lab*) children' (1 Sam. 1:2) but she did have them later ... Similarly, 'Zion whom no one (*en lab*) seeks out' (Jeremiah 30:17), but later she will have [someone to seek her out], as it is said, 'And a redeemer shall come to Zion' (Isaiah 59:20). Similarly, 'There is none (*en lab*) to comfort her,' but she will have [a comforter] later, as it is said, 'I, I am he who comforts you' (Isaiah 51:12)." (B 31a–b = S 96 and B 46a = S 141)<sup>40</sup>

Scripture said "There is none," but R. Levi declares "there will be."

Even when it admitted that Lamentations was recited by a human, and not a divine, voice, and that "there is none" meant "there is none," the midrash was still able to convert its subject to a book of hope. It could, of course, merely offset the bleak verses of Lamentations with the glorious prophecies of Isaiah (B 29a = S 88–90 and B 80b = S 243–44) but Lamentations Rabbati was more resourceful. As I discussed above, the midrash understood Lamentations to be a paradigmatic statement of Jewish suffering. The prophet Jeremiah warned the Jews that these torments would befall them whenever they would sin. By illustrating [35] every phrase of the book, either through prooftexts or anecdotes, Lamentations Rabbati attempted to show that the paradigm had been fulfilled and that the Jews had suffered all that they were meant to suffer. Lamentations is a receipt for all that they endured:

Better was the book of Lamentations for Israel than the forty years during which Jeremiah inveighed against them. Why? Because in it Israel received full settlement for their iniquities on the day the temple was destroyed. That is what is written, "Your iniquity, fair Zion, is expiated" (Lam. 4:22). (B 77b = S 235)

If the suffering is complete and the sums are expiated, redemption is sure to come:

<sup>40</sup> Cf. "you find that with the thing through which Israel sinned they were punished, and with the same thing they were (or: will be) comforted" (B 47b = S 146). Cf. too the exegesis of "as" (Hebrew *k*) at B 23a–b = S 71–72; B 56a = S 171; B 56b = S 172.

On another occasion they [R. Gamaliel, R. Eleazar b. Azariah, R. Joshua, and R. Akiva] were coming up to Jerusalem, and when they reached Mount Scopus they rent their garments [in mourning]. When they arrived at the temple mount, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They began to cry but R. Akiva laughed. They said to him, "Akiva, you always surprise us. We weep and you are merry!" He replied to them, "Why are you weeping?" They answered, "Shall we not weep that a fox emerges from the place of which it was written 'Any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death' (Num. 1:51)? In our presence the verse was fulfilled, 'Because of this our hearts are sick ... because of Mount Zion which lies desolate; foxes prowl over it' (Lam. 5:17-18)." He said to them, "For that reason am I merry ... I rejoiced because the words of Uriah have been fulfilled ['Zion shall be plowed as a field,' Jeremiah 26:18]; in the future the words of Zechariah will be fulfilled [the restoration of Zion, Zechariah 7:4-5]." Thereupon they addressed him with these words, "Akiva, you have consoled us; may you be comforted by the coming of the herald [of redemption]." (B 80a-b = S 242-43)

This story, probably spun out of Lam. 5:17-18, shows that even the minute details of Jeremiah's "prophecy" have been fulfilled. And if the paradigm of suffering has been fulfilled, we may be sure that the paradigm of redemption will be fulfilled as well.<sup>41</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbati are intimately related. The relationship is not only that of a text and its commentary, but also that of two texts written in similar situations and answering similar needs. Both works describe in great detail the destruction of Jerusalem and the sufferings of the city's inhabitants. Both confront the problem of theodicy and both attempt to justify God's ways by confessing Israel's sins. Both try to find hope for the future. Both works concentrate on the same five themes. But in spite of these similarities the two works are fundamentally dissimilar, not only in literary form but also in [36] content. Written approximately one thousand years apart, each reflects the spirit of its own age.

Lamentations was written relatively soon after the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C.E. Since the wounds were still raw and the shock was still great, the author had difficulty finding hope. Overwhelmed by the tragedy, he devoted the largest part of his work to moans and laments. He admits that the Israelites had sinned, thereby accepting the destruction as a condign punishment from God. He also adheres to the view accepted by many of his contemporaries that God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children. The

<sup>41</sup> The power of this theory can be gauged by its appeal to Samuel Usque in the sixteenth century. See *Samuel Usque's Consolation for the tribulations of Israel*, ed. Martin A. Cohen (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 21. Usque knew Lam. R. (p. 274).

Lord has punished justly; the author impatiently awaits the return of divine mercy. He fears that God may have abandoned his people after punishing them. Like Job he flirts with the idea that God is a malevolent deity who inflicts pain without reason on powerless mortals, but like Job he rejects it. He reaffirms his faith in God and expresses guarded hope for the future.

When Lamentations Rabbati was written, the gloom of exile and the lack of a temple had been facts of Jewish life for centuries. Hence the shock and disbelief which impelled Lamentations are absent from Lamentations Rabbati which, on the whole, is a much more cheerful work. The rabbis too were disturbed by the slowness of God's change from anger to mercy, but they were not disturbed by Job's complaints.<sup>42</sup> The rabbis too believed that the Jews deserved punishment, even specifying the sins which brought down the destruction, but they firmly rejected the notion that God punishes the children for the sins of the fathers. The reason that Lamentations Rabbati is a much more cheerful work than Lamentations is that the rabbis believed with complete faith in the messiah. A time would come when Israel would be vindicated and Israel's enemies would be discomfited. For the midrash this was not wishful thinking but an inevitable reality. This belief did not eliminate the fear that God may have abandoned his people, but the rabbis pose the dilemma in a way which betrays the conditions of their age: why do the nations prosper while Israel suffers? Why are the nations allowed to mock Israel? The midrash is unable to answer these questions fully, but it does reassure its readers that the Jews are God's chosen people and that they are superior to the nations. The rabbis often propounded the autonomy, even superiority, of Judaism, all the while they adapted Hellenistic culture to their own ends. Lamentations Rabbati includes secular tales about the wisdom of the Jerusalemites, has the beginnings of a rationalistic historiography akin to that of the Greeks, and abounds in Greek words. The sages of Jerusalem did converse with the sages of Athens.

<sup>42</sup> Because it downplays martyrdom, Lam. R. even ignores the theological insights of Job which elsewhere do figure in rabbinic thinking: suffering as a test, and suffering as purification.

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