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Spelling out No-Where.

Lamentations as a textual space of survival¹

Cet article entend aborder l'espace linguistique des Lamentations de Jérémie comme un espace de survie, un espace qui permettrait d'imaginer un futur en dépit de la destruction. Cet avenir existe seulement dans le langage, pas dans la réalité. Aux nombreux malheurs qui s'abattent sur Jérusalem on oppose un espace linguistique dans lequel l'indicible cruauté peut être exprimée. L'analyse de cet espace s'inspire des discussions littéraires consacrées à l'espace linguistique des textes littéraires. Pour examiner les Lamentations de Jérémie, Bail s'appuie sur le phénomène des acrostiches et des chants funébres. Entre la détresse et la survie, l'espace linguistique des Lamentations devient une „utopie“, dans son sens originel de „nulle part“, „en aucun lieu“. Mais dans ce nulle part, l'imagination du lecteur peut inventer un autre lieu qui pourra faire l'objet d'une quête et lui permettra de survivre sans trahir la mémoire des défunts.

The place from which the Lamentations of Jeremiah speak is a place which has been destroyed: the gates of Jerusalem lie devastated (Jeremiah 1:4; 2:9); the fortresses have been torn down (2:2); the palaces and strongholds have been razed and destroyed (2:5, 8). This is a place in which life no longer exists, a place of terror from which no-one escaped and in which no-one survived (2:22).

It may seem quite inappropriate to use this text as a basis for considering what utopia might mean. But perhaps a consideration of this “No-Place” can make clear the sense in which it is indeed utopian. Here it is not possible to seek refuge in light talk of the hereafter. The text speaks of and through a space which exists now only in silence and in which language can only survive at the cost of betraying the dead.

It is in confronting this destroyed place and in confronting the difficulty of speaking appropriately of what has been experienced that Lamentations finds the distance necessary for speech.

Tod Linafelt writes – and this paper came into being in a process of dialogue with his thoughts about Lamentations – “The book struggles on, of course, attempting to stave off the silence, the white space, employing a number of rhetorical strategies to express the grief and anger of the community and to elicit divine response.”²

This speech is not linear; it does not have chronological strands of action and thought. Instead, a linguistic space is drafted out so as to create, almost graphically, a textual space in which speech is possible in the face of destruction.

However, this speech itself trails off into silence. The multi-faceted way in which the experience of being beset upon or besieged by “terrors on all sides” (*megur misabib*: Jeremiah 2:22) is not translated into a sequence of events.³ Instead, the text of Lamentations constructs a spatial textuality which is given structure through simultaneity and reversibility, that is, by cross-references and thus by movements both forwards and backwards.⁴ Within this linguistic space it is possible for the inexpressible and the incomprehensible to take shape in words and so to survive, “as if we had a future.”⁵

The book of Lamentations begins with a word which in the Masoretic text of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* is separated from the text which follows: *'ekah*. This word not only stands alone in the first line,⁶ but is indented. More precisely, it is indented, not into the body of the text, but out of the body of the text – into the blank margin. In this way the word *'ekah* is made to stand out.

In the Jewish Tradition, this first word gives the book its name: “Echa”.⁷ But its isolated place gives it a far deeper meaning than simply that of a label for the book. *'ekah* is a call to lament, a cry of despair, the sound which rises into the throat in the midst of horror and grief. It can hardly be reproduced in another language: translations such as *alas! woe! O woe!* sound banal and meaningless. It is a cry of alarm which has been put into letters to fix it – in the whole breadth of its meaning. No words follow: there is silence for a whole line.

Linafelt begins his discussions of Lamentations by citing Edmond Jabès in order to show that, despite all its verses, in the book of Lamentations, silence is what remains of the attempt to survive the horror in speaking or writing: “There is the white space before the event and the white space after. But who could tell them apart?”⁸

The cry of lament breaks into the crippling silence, sets the first letter in the white space, on the empty page. So, in the midst of the despair, it is possible to begin to speak, and then, after a certain number of words to enter the silence again, in the midst of the words. The second and fourth laments also begin with “Echa”, and are in this way connected to the beginning and to the silence before the beginning.

But how is the intermezzo of speech between the silences structured? What finds its way into words in this space, and how? Lamentations begins not only with a cry of lament but with the first letter of the alphabet and thus initiates the alphabetical, acrostic structure of the laments.⁹

Each of the first four laments has twenty-two consecutive verses which begin with the letters from Aleph to Taw, but which have different lengths. Although the fifth book is not alphabetical, it has twenty-two verses, just as the Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters. The book of Lamentations thus contains five laments, later numbered as five chapters. Although the arrangement of the verses according to the letters of the alphabet is a clear structural marker, “no certain explanation for this alphabetical poetical structure [...] has yet been found.”¹⁰

Possible explanations have implied that this structure has magical overtones, that it is a mnemonic device, or that it was chosen for reasons of aesthetics. Most interpreters date the alphabetical structure to a later period, since like Westermann they cannot imagine “that those who had been directly affected by the catastrophe would have had the patience to construct such an alphabetical arrangement.”¹¹

But is it not possible that precisely in the face of the catastrophe the alphabet could offer a framework “which protected the author from endlessness”?¹² And might it not also be possible in a traumatic situation to seek “safety in alphabetical prayers”, to cite a line from a poem by Durs Grünbein?¹³

This is not to seek to answer the question of when Lamentations took on its acrostic form, which must remain open, as must the question of how and from whom the words in and from the catastrophe acquired a literary structure, text, and a linguistic space. How much distance – both in a psychological and in an aesthetic sense – is necessary for the writing of texts of survival? How touched must someone be, if they are to speak with their own voice? When does a cry become a text?

The alphabet lends a strong structure to the linguistic space of Lamentations. The horror which is breaking in upon the destroyed city of Jerusalem from all sides is here opposed by a linguistic space in which the remaining fragments can be secured. In the midst of the catastrophe itself, only a despairing cry can be thought of. What does it mean to expose oneself to what has happened in memory, to articulate the unbearably empty white spaces before and after what had happened in such a way that they can not only be survived but communicated?

The trauma resulting from the destruction of Jerusalem does not only arise from the situation itself but is continually exacerbated by memories. The alphabetical ordering of Lamentations might represent the wish not to be irredeemably crushed by those memories, but rather to create for them – and thus for oneself – a space of preservation.¹⁴

That which in the immediate experience of traumatising destruction can only be expressed in broken words or cries, is expressed in Lamentations in the full knowledge of the dilemma of the survivor.¹⁵ As Tod Linafelt puts it: “The poet is caught in the survivor’s dilemma: to speak is to betray the memory of the dead, for there is no adequate language; but to remain silent is a worse betrayal. So the poet continues.”¹⁶

This becomes particularly clear in the rhetorical question of Jeremiah 2:13:

To what can I compare you, to what can I liken you, daughter of Jerusalem? To what can I liken you to comfort you, virgin daughter of Zion? For as vast as the sea is your ruin: what can heal you?

Although the response to this question can only be silence, it is preceded and followed by images which attempt to articulate the collapse. Body imagery is frequently used: thus the destroyed city is compared to “a woman who is menstruating, and so unclean”¹⁷ and with a naked, raped and wounded woman (Jeremiah 1:8, 9, 15). The use of the female body as a symbol of the destroyed city reflects the actual experience of women during war. It is their experiences which underlie the elegy. These linguistic images are, however, always ambivalent: on the one hand they can be interpreted as a manner of perceiving and understanding the effects of military conflicts on the lives and bodies of women, while on the other hand they might repeat the violence against women in language and through language.¹⁸

The rhetorical question in Jeremiah 2:13 is given a negative formulation in the first lament which functions somewhat as an antiphon: *There is no-one to comfort her* (1.2, 7, 9, 16, 17, 21). The negation is expressed with the word *'ajin*, which has the root meaning “non-existence.”¹⁹ It is not simply that the person who could offer comfort or help is absent, but that such a person does not exist. A similar formulation can be found in the fifth lament: *There is no-one ('ajin) to rescue/tear us from their hands* (Jeremiah 5:8).

These antiphons of despair refer to each other. The repetition of these words structures the spatial textuality by linking words across the silence. The textual space becomes a space of protection in which speech and silence can be experienced simultaneously: “Echa”.

The Babylonian Talmud (baba bathra 14b) gives a different heading: *qinot* (hebr. pl., sg. *qinah*) – song of lament, death lament. Heseekiah 2:9-10 refers to a scroll, which *had writing on the front and the back, and written on it were words of laments and mourning and woe.*²⁰

The term *qinah* is “at the same time the name of the genus Lamentation and of its particular meter.”²¹ According to Cross, the poetic meter of the *qinah*-laments is defined, not by a particular number or pattern of emphases, but by a parallelismus membrorum “in which grammatical and semantic binarism is chiefly between corresponding bicola.”²² This division can be seen in the contrast, typical for prophetic death laments, between then and now, between which lie destruction and death.²³ The text of Lamentations in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia makes the contrasts of the bicola visually clear by leaving a gap between them, even when no contrast is to be found in the content of the text. The Biblia Hebraica also leaves a space between each of the alphabetical verses,²⁴ as breath, taken away by the horror, must be drawn again and again if further speech is to be possible. It is as though the “poet” of Lamentations sought to translate the horror into a fixed linguistic space. This can be seen even in the first verse, which reads:

1 Echa/woe -

<i>how lonely sits the city</i>	<i>(once) it was full of people!</i>
<i>like a widow she has become</i>	<i>she was great amongst nations</i>
<i>A princess amongst provinces</i>	<i>(now) she must do forced labour.</i>

The call to lament is followed by a series of statements about *the* city. The city remains unnamed (not until verse 3 is it referred to as Judah, in verse 4 as Zion, and in verse 7 Jerusalem); instead, the city exists alone; no-one (more) lives in it; it is deserted, isolated. The current situation is formulated verbally. The structure of the sentence preserves what used to be in a nominal style; the brilliant past is now only a state; neither motion nor dynamism arise from it. What brings movement is the present state of the city, but the city is destroyed and thus essentially unmoved: isolation, loneliness, widowed, forced labour.

But the words for then and now, typical of prophetic death laments²⁵ are not explicitly formulated, as they are in, for example, Isaiah 1:21 where the *now* (*'attah*) of the present is named. The temporal contrasts only become apparent in the second half of the verse, through the chiasmic structure of now – then – then – now. The brilliant, vivid, communicative past is surrounded by the present state of destruction.

The cyclical structure in which the content of the beginning of the verse matches that of the end emphasises this: lonely sitting – doing forced labour.²⁶ The cruel fact of death is total; the structure of the sentence almost imitates the besieging and destruction.

At the same time, language is not lost amid the destruction. Instead, it translates the horror into the linguistic space of the *qinah* by imagining the traditional voices and laments of the mourning women.²⁷ The destruction of the city, the city's dead *female* body, is mourned. But at the same time, the book sketches an image of the city as a woman who is alive but injured. It is doubtful whether this allows us to conclude that the historical authors were women. Yet the strong connection between public lamentation and mourning women suggests that the genre of the elegy reflects the voices of women. Women are present on the literary level – as mourning voices, as despairing, broken or dying voices, but also as voices which in Echa's both loud and silent lament recall the catastrophe.

Westermann sees in Lamentations a connection between traditional laments and motifs of death laments: "In direct response to the catastrophe of 587, Jerusalem's collapse is portrayed in such a way that motifs of death laments can be heard in the nation's lament, because the city's collapse is experienced as the death of the city."²⁸ The book of Lamentations is made up of the laments of survivors who find themselves living the tension between wholeness and destruction, between life and death.

Like the recognition that *There is no comforter*, these statements de profundis are at the same time witnesses of longing: that there might be a comforter, that rescue could be possible. Lamentations begins to speak between the torments and in the impossibility of rescue; a language is found in the midst of despair, and this language makes survival possible.²⁹ But where does the potential of longing become the sure expectation of a rescue which goes beyond survival?

The tractate Sanhedrin from the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 98), includes a discussion about the name of the approaching Messiah. One of the suggestions is: *Some say that he is called Menachem (son of Hizqijas), for it is written: for the comforter who has refreshed my heart is far from me.*³⁰

The name of the Messiah *Menachem/Comforter* is derived from Lamentations 1:16: from the place where the Messiah is not present, where he is far away, where the *'ajin* of the Comforter is to be found. It is in this non-place that the Messiah's name appears. The place of destruction knows about utopia.

Lamentations is not utopia in the sense of "a space of contentment"³¹ – as the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has formulated it – except in its literal translation of the word utopia: *nowhere*: that is, as a bringing to word of that which has no place in reality. "Nowhere is the place given in

response to the question of where what we wish is”³² – the place of survival which is given no place in reality, except within the framework of Lamentations.

Utopia is not read only in the positing of spaces of contentment; even Brecht’s Mahagonny-Minimum “something is missing” is utopian in as much as it calls for change and does not simply register absence. The language and form of Lamentations create a space of safety by spelling out the things which are to be sheltered in the text’s space of memory.

In this way, the text itself becomes utopia, and the spatial textuality becomes a utopian space, within which and because the unspeakable horror becomes speakable.

In the reader’s imagination another place appears, also at the margins and in the gaps of the text.³³ The reader is challenged to seek out this other place, this place which Lamentations spells out as *Echa, no place, nowhere*, a textual space which enables survival.

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¹ Translated by Dr. Charlotte Methuen. Cf. Ulrike Bail, Wehe, kein Ort, nirgends... Überlegungen zum Sprachraum der Klagelieder Jeremias, in: Charlotte Methuen (Hg.), *Time – Utopia – Eschatology* (Jahrbuch der ESWTR 1999), Leuven 1999, 81-90.

² Tod Linafelt, Margins of Lamentation, Or, The Unbearable Whiteness of Reading, in: Timothy K. Beal / David M. Gunn (eds.), *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies. Identity and The Book*, London/New York 1996, 219-231, 226.

³ On the problem of the linguistic linearising of the perception of space, see Karin Wenz, *Raum, Raumsprache und Sprachräume. Zur Textsemiotik der Raumbeschreibung* (Kodikas/Code Supplement 22), Tübingen 1997, 57ff.

⁴ For simultaneity and reversibility of spatial textuality, see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Der literarische Raum. Eine Untersuchung am Beispiel von Dorothy M. Richardsons Romanzyklus Pilgrimage* (Studien zur Englischen Philologie, Neue Folge 25), Tübingen 1986, 216ff.

⁵ Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 353.

⁶This is emphasised by the separating accent $\overset{\text{L}}{\text{garmeh}}$ which the Masoretes placed after the word *'ekah*. The $\overset{\text{L}}{\text{garmeh}}$ is made up of a linking character ($\overset{\text{M}}{\text{ûnah}}$) and a separating character ($\overset{\text{P}}{\text{aseq}}$), so that it divides and combines at one and the same time. In the facsimile of the Codex Leningradensis (Folio 430 recto), *'ekah* does not stand in a separate line; however, the accent both distinguishes it from and connects it to the body of the text.

The first line is empty, to signal the beginning of a new book. See David N. Freedmann/Astrid B. Beck (eds.), *The Leningrad Codex. A Facsimile Edition*, Grand Rapids, Michigan et al 1997; Rudolph Meyer, *Hebräische Grammatik*, Berlin/New York (1972) 1992, § 16.3. The manuscript fragment of Lamentations found at Qumran (4Q111=4QLam=4QThr^a) unfortunately begins only with verse 1aβ, so that it is not possible to see whether *'ekah* is distinguished from the body of the text. Nebe, who suggests that a fragment of text should be placed before the text as published by Cross, unfortunately does not say how big this fragment is. From his description it would seem not to differ from the masoretic text. See Frank Moore Cross, *Studies in the Scripture of Hebrew Verse: The Prosody of Lamentations 1:1-22*, in: C.L. Meyers / M. O'Connor (eds.), *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth. Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman*, Winona Lake 1983, 129-155, 134; G. Wilhelm Nebe, *Qumranica I: Zu unveröffentlichten Handschriften aus Höhle 4 von Qumran*, in: *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 106 (1994), 307-322, 313f.

⁷ In Hebrew manuscripts and published texts, *'ekah* is marked out as a title. On the different names given to the book (Echa, qinot, Threni, lamentationes Jeremiae), see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament XX), Neukirchen-Vluyn⁴ 1983, 5.

⁸ Linafelt, *Margins of Lamentation*, 219; Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. R. Waldrop, Chicago 1993, 91.

⁹ The Qumran fragments also show an alphabetical arrangement, but the text is not laid out as it is in the *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The lines of the columns of text in 4QLam are not identical with the verses. See Cross, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Verse*, 130, 134.

¹⁰ Claus Westermann, *Die Klagelieder. Forschungsgeschichte und Auslegung*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1990, 91. Compare also Kraus, *Klagelieder*, 6.

¹¹ Westermann, *Die Klagelieder*, 92.

¹² Ivo Meyer, *Die Klagelieder*, in: Erich Zenger u.a., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln 1995, 337-342, 338; this way of understanding the alphabetical order is mentioned also by Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible. A Socio-Literary Introduction*, Philadelphia 1987, 541.

¹³ "...in alphabetischen Gebeten Halt": These words, by the poet Durs Grünbein, form the last line of the seventh poem of his cycle "Variationen auf kein Thema", see Durs Grünbein, *Falten und Fallen. Gedichte*, Frankfurt⁶ 1996, 17.

¹⁴ 9 Aw, the day on which Lamentations is read liturgically, could have a similar function. This day is a national day of mourning in remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem, the diaspora and past persecution. The Mishnah lists five catastrophes which took place on this day. Destruction, expulsions and persecutions in different times and places are collected on one day – perhaps in order to give remembrance to a place in time. Compare Ismar Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, Hildesheim u.a. 1995, 128ff., 229ff.; Israel Meir Lau, *Wie Juden leben. Glaube, Alltag, Feste*, Gütersloh 1988, 288ff.

¹⁵ The dilemma of creating literature in the face of horror has been expressed in the discussions around Adorno's statement, made in 1951 but later altered, that after Auschwitz it would be barbaric to write a poem. See Petra Kiedaisch (Hg.), *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*, Stuttgart 1995. In recent years the question of the possibility or impossibility of an aesthetic of memory has again been discussed in the light of the suggestion that a "Shoa memorial" should be erected in Berlin.

¹⁶ Linafelt, *Margins of Lamentation*, 225.

¹⁷ Maria Häusl, *Die Klagelieder. Zions Stimme in der Not*, in: Luise Schottroff/Marie Theres Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, Gütersloh 1998, 270-277, 271.

¹⁸ Compare Ulrike Bail, *Gegen das Schweigen klagen. Eine intertextuelle Studie zu den Klagepsalmen Ps 6 und Ps 55 und der Erzählung von der Vergewaltigung Tamars*, Gütersloh 1998, 187ff.; Gerlinde Baumann, *Liebe und Gewalt. Die Ehe als Metapher für das Verhältnis von JHWH – Israel in den Prophetenbüchern* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 185), Stuttgart 2000, 175-182.

¹⁹ S. Schwertner, Art. *'ajin*, *Theologisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament I* (⁵1994), 127-130, 128.

²⁰ See 2 Chronicles 35:25.

²¹ Jürgen Ebach, *Die Niederlage von 587/6 und ihre Reflexion in der Theologie Israels*, *Einwürfe* 5 (1988), 70-103, 81. Compare also Westermann, *Die Klagelieder*, 15ff, 60f, 82ff, 106ff; Kraus, *Klagelieder*, 7ff.26. Based on Lamentations, other kinot with the theme of persecution and martyrdom can also be found in Judaism. These poetic elegies are used in the liturgy on 9 Aw. See Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst*, 128ff, 229ff.; Lau, *Wie Juden leben*, 288ff.

²² Cross, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Verse*, 133, 152f.

²³ Compare, for instance, Heseekiah 19:2-14; 26:17-18; Isaiah 1:21-23; 23:1-14; Amos 5:1-2.

²⁴ In the masoretic text, this space is marked with the symbol for a paragraph (Samech = parašah p^etuḥah). The reproduction of this symbol in the *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* shows the original structure of the Codex Leningradensis. However, in the Codex Leningradensis, this space is not between the lines but in the lines, at the beginning or end of a line. See Freedmann/Beck (eds.), *The Leningrad Codex. A Facsimile Edition*, Fol. 430 recto ff.; Page H. Kelly et al., *The Masorah of the Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Introduction and Annotated Glossary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K. 1998, 155f.

²⁵ For the difference between normal and prophetic death laments, see Westermann, *Die Klagelieder*, 15f. While normal death laments do not always exploit the contrast between different times and tenses (once – now), prophetic death laments, which are laments about people who still live, always do so. Their *qinah* has a rhythm of contrasts.

²⁶ Compare Cross, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Verse*, 135.

²⁷ In the Hebrew Bible, it is usually women who lead the laments which mourn for the dead. See, for instance, Jeremiah 31:15; 38:22; 49:3; 9:16-21; Heseekiah 8:14; 32:16; Amos 8:3; Judges 11:40. Compare Häusl, *Die Klagelieder*, 275f.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ See Linafelt, *Margins of Lamentation*, 230.

³⁰ Cited according to Lazarus Goldschmidt, *Der babylonische Talmud*, Band 9, Berlin 1939, 71 (Fol. 98b).

³¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetik des Raumes*, Frankfurt 1997, 25. In his “Topo-Analysis” (*ibid.*, 35) or “Topophilia” (*ibid.*, 25) Bachelard investigates “literary images of the space of contentment”, such as house, nest, shell, niche. At the beginning of his discussion of “inner immeasurability”, he writes: “[The dream world] seeks to escape the immediate, and is immediately far away, elsewhere else, in the space of somewhere else” (*ibid.*, 186). His spaces of contentment have a place in the imagination, in the “creative abilities of speaking being,” in the “imaginative consciousness” (*ibid.*, 15).

³² Burghart Schmidt, *Utopie ist keine Literaturgattung*, in: Gert Ueding (Hg.), *Literatur ist Utopie*, Frankfurt 1978, 17-44, 19. Schmidt makes it clear that utopia is not read only in the positing of spaces of contentment, but that even Brecht’s *Mahagonny-Minimum* “something is missing” is utopian in as much as it calls for change and does not simply register absence (*ibid.*, 41).

³³ For literature as utopia, see Gert Ueding, *Literatur ist Utopie*, in: Gert Ueding, *Literatur ist Utopie*, Frankfurt 1978, 7-14; Karl-Heinz Bohrer, *Utopie des ‚Augenblicks‘ und Fiktionalität. Die Subjektivisierung von Zeit in der modernen Literatur*, in: Gert Ueding, *Plötzlichkeit. Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins. Mit einem Nachwort von 1998*, Frankfurt ²1998, 180-218.