The Use of Poetic Form as Metaphor:
Lamentations 4 and the Alphabetic Acrostic

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Introduction

The Book of Lamentations is relatively short, only five chapters totaling 154 verses, and appears to be monothematic in its content – grief over the destruction of Jerusalem. In general terms, Chapters 1 and 5 describe the aftermath following the destruction of Jerusalem, Chapters 2 and 4 describe events during the siege of the city, and Chapter 3, in the center of the book, provides the theological message of Lamentations.\(^1\) Despite this brevity and singular theme, it is a fascinating study in both its form and content. Perhaps the most striking feature of Lamentations is the fact that the entirety of each of the five chapters is an alphabetic acrostic poem in which each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet appear in order as the first letter of each verse (Chapters 3 and 5 show some variation but still hold to the general acrostic form). It is this feature of Lamentations which is of interest, particularly the function of the acrostic poetic device. A good deal of the scholarship devoted to this book has forwarded various explanations and theories behind the use of the acrostic form while others have summarily dismissed it. Despite the fact that the acrostic form is generally hidden by translation from the original Hebrew, I propose that we are meant to take meaning from it as well as from the text itself. Like most poetry, the text of the Book of Lamentations is rich in metaphor which, when unlocked, can reveal the meaning of the text on various levels. I argue that the very structure of this text, namely the acrostic form, when unlocked, reveals meaning as well.

The Book of Lamentations is an excellent example of literary form serving as metaphor. The alphabetic acrostic poetic device used throughout Lamentations is more than an art form, mnemonic device, or part of an academic pedagogy; the alphabetized colon represent a deeper

semantic field which is reflected in the text itself. This paper will attempt to illustrate this feature of the book.

**Methodology**

As we shall see, there is debate over the unity and coherency of the five chapters of Lamentations. After spending time with the text, I tend to agree with those who propose that the entire book forms a unity regardless of authorship or redaction. However, while it is helpful to cite examples of structures which transcend chapter boundaries in support of the thesis, it is impractical to attempt to cover all of Lamentations here. Therefore, examples of the larger structure will be used when necessary but the particular analysis will be limited to Chapter 4 which should be sufficient for the proposed illustration.

Further sub-units can be identified within Chapter 4 itself but since the entire chapter forms a single acrostic poem, which is the primary interest of this research, the entire chapter must be taken as a unit. The fact that it is a complete acrostic indicates that this probably represents a division of the text intended by the poet. Several smaller units can be identified within the chapter based on voice and theme. It appears to be the unknown poet narrating throughout the poem but several changes in voice occur. Vv. 1-16 are narrated in the third person (vv. 1-10 describing the aftermath of the siege of Jerusalem, vv. 11-16 describing the causes of the disaster). This begins to change in v. 15 with an apparent transition in narration as the poet quotes the people of Jerusalem. However, this change in voice is not well attested since there are differences in the manner in which the quotation is presented in MT, LXX, and several English translations such as *NAB*. A change in voice clearly occurs in vv. 17-20 as the poet shifts from third person narration to the first person plural. There is also a shift in tone and
theme as well; the narrator shifts his focus from God as the cause of the destruction to Jerusalem’s enemies. A third shift occurs in vv. 21-22 as the poet/narrator addresses the enemies of Jerusalem directly.

The common theme throughout Chapter 4 is the grief over the destruction of Jerusalem but, as stated above, more specific, coherent themes can be identified in subunits of the text. It appears common for commentators to divide the chapter into four subunits. The following divisions are used by Kathleen O’Connor:

- vv. 1-10: Everything grows dim
- vv. 11-16: Why this has happened
- vv. 17-20: Retelling of the invasion
- vv. 21-22: Future reversals

While a smaller unit could be selected from this chapter, it is necessary to take the chapter as a whole to maintain the integrity of the acrostic form which is central to the topic of this paper.

In order to go about this demonstration it will first be necessary to understand the function and structure of metaphor. Although I believe that the entire text shows a coherency in structure and theme, only Lamentations 4 will be examined in detail. Through an analysis of Chapter 4, in concert with a general understanding of the remaining chapters, the understanding of metaphor will be expanded to show how the acrostic poetic structure has been used by the poet(s) as a metaphor. The historical context of the text will provide an important basis for understanding this structural metaphor as will some foundational information regarding ancient Hebrew poetry, the acrostic form, and the lament as a literary genre. A line-by-line analysis of

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the text will provide the final elements necessary for illustrating how the poet reflected similar concepts through his structuring of the poem as well as the actual words and images he used in the text.

**Metaphor**

In order to accomplish this task, an understanding of the function and inner structure of metaphor is needed. The point of departure will be a simple definition: “A metaphor is the expression of an understanding of one concept in terms of another concept, where there is some similarity or correlation between the two.” This is a particular dense definition; we are often accustomed to thinking of metaphor in terms closer to those of simile which require a specific logical verbal pattern: “this is like that” or “this is as that.” It is true that metaphors can assume a similar and overt pattern by the simple removal of the prepositions “like” or “as” but the true power of a metaphor lies beneath the word construct and within the concept or concepts which are brought into relation. In classic Aristotelian logic, a relationship exists between the object in reality and its associated thought or concept in the mind. This relationship is semantic and is manifested through language. I have an idea of what a dog is which corresponds to a specific object in reality, a real dog or a category of animals resembling dogs, and I have been taught to relate those real objects with my idea or concept through the use of the word “dog”, “perro”, “Hund”, etc… Furthermore, the real object dog or the category of dogs has concrete, universal properties such as living, non-rational, omnivorous, etc… just as other real objects or categories of objects have concrete, universal properties. Linguistically, the objects of comparison could be

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3. This analysis is contained in Appendix A. Summaries will be used as necessary in the arguments.

referred to as the source and target while their properties could be referred to as semantic fields or the source domain and target domain. In classical terms, a metaphor seeks to express an understanding of one concept (the target which can be associated with a real object) in terms of another concept (the source) whose semantic field or domain overlaps with the target’s domain. Thus, we might speak of another living, non-rational, or omnivorous object in terms of a dog. Such metaphors, referred to as referential metaphors, are based on what can actually be seen or visualized. The basic Venn diagram is useful in illustrating metaphors. In this example, the overlapping areas would represent the overlapping source and target domains which contain the characteristic omnivorous:

![Venn Diagram]

The relationship between the source and target in a metaphor may be once removed (or twice or thrice . . . ) from each other in terms of their semantic fields. For example, a dog acts non-rationally which is a direct property of a dog; non-rational is within the first semantic field of dog. The unjust man acts against the common good and since the common good is for his own

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benefit as well, he acts contrary to his own self interest. Acting against one’s own benefit is irrational or non-rational. *Acting against the common good* belongs to the first semantic field of *unjust man*, *acting contrary to self interest* belongs to the second, and *acting non-rationally* to the third. Through a series of steps we could recognize the metaphor relating an unjust man to a dog.

This example highlights an additional feature of metaphors which departs from the classical definition used thus far. The semantic field associated with an object or a concept is rarely concrete and universal; more often it is experiential. If my experience of dogs is generally negative (dogs are dirty, vicious, and dominated by survival instincts), I will readily be able to recognize the metaphorical reference to an unjust man. However, if my experience of dogs is limited to faithful pets and companions, I might have difficulty making the semantic leap from *dog to unjust man*. I might be more inclined to the opposite association; the *just man*, whose semantic field includes faithfulness, compassion, and obedience, is a *dog*.

To my knowledge, this latter metaphor never appears in biblical texts, being more apropos to contemporary western cultures. This underscores the necessity to consider the cultural context of the metaphor. There is a great deal of contemporary scholarship regarding cognitive models and the variability of not only the semantics of a concept but the concept itself.
among various groups of people. This scholarship could certainly add to the understanding of
the function and structure of metaphor but for the purpose of this project the basic definition
given above will suffice with the added caveat that the correlation between the semantic fields of
the two concepts may be based on the experiences of the author in a given cultural and historical
setting.

**Review of Literature**

A fair amount of research has been conducted on the Book of Lamentation and its
acrostic poems. This is despite the tendency for many scholars dismiss their significance. Many
scholars attribute the acrostic form to nothing more than a mnemonic device which aids in the
memorization of the poem. Others simply attribute it to a highly structured art form. Still others
acknowledge that it has some significance, especially with regard to Lamentations, but go no
further than to state that it represents the theme of totality - from “a to z” (or from aleph to taw).6
However, several authors, namely Elie Assis and Kathleen M. O’Connor, have spent a great
scholarship examining the meaning of the acrostic form in Lamentations.

In his article “The Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations,”7 Assis
acknowledges the aforementioned explanations of the acrostic form and the fact that they may
serve a number of purposes. However, he also proposes a new interpretation: the acrostic form,
with its rigid and well thought-out structure, contrasts the chaos and grief manifested in the text.
The poet employs this technique in order to draw the reader into a second, deeper reading of the

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7. Elie Assis, "The Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69, no. 4
text with the hope of imparting a theological message. “The acrostic form was adopted so that the book would interact with the reader not only on an emotional level but on a rational one as well.”

He further adds that the book, taken as a whole, forms a chiastic structure with Chapter 3 appearing in the center and containing the focus of the entire book: in the midst of the devastation and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, God has not cast off Israel; there is hope.

Assis further solidifies his position on the coherency of Lamentations in “The Unity of the Book of Lamentations.” After acknowledging the various positions supporting and refuting the single author theory, he turns to the structure and content of the book to demonstrate its coherency. Similar to his previous theory regarding its chiastic structure, Assis describes the similarities between Chapters 1 and 5, Chapters 2 and 4, and the centrality of Chapter 3. Furthermore, he contends that this structure “was immanent in the book’s original composition and not part of a secondary arrangement.”

Some scholars, such as Cornelius Houk, oppose these conclusions in favor of results from syllable-word pattern analyses which they believe demonstrate the existence of multiple poets.

Kathleen M. O’Connor has proposed similar interpretations of the acrostic form and the coherency of Lamentations in her book Lamentations & the Tears of the World. However, O’Connor’s interpretation offers an explanation for the variation in the acrostic form of Chapter

10. Ibid., 328.
5. This chapter contains 22 verses, similar to Chapters 1, 2, and 4 but it lacks the overt alphabetic acrostic form manifested by the first letter of each verse. In contrast, Chapter 3, the height of the book, expands the acrostic form to highlight the chapter’s importance. This chapter contains 66 verse, thrice the number of the other four chapters, and each letter of the alphabet appears at the beginning of verses in sets of three (aleph: vv. 1-3, bet: vv. 4-6; gimel: vv. 7-9; etc…). She establishes similarities in form and content between Chapters 1 and 2, the crescendo of Chapter 3, the diminishment of form in Chapter 4, and finally in Chapter 5, the fact that the acrostic form, while still present, is barely discernible as if to say the grief which the poet has poured forth in the previous chapters has exhausted him spiritually, physically, and emotionally.

**Lamentations: Background Information**

**Historical Context**

The historical context of Lamentations is important for understanding its content. Between 597 BC and 582 BC, Judea, which had previously enjoyed a period of relative tranquility, was caught in a power struggle between Egypt and Babylon. Allying herself with the Egyptian monarchy, which would ultimately fail her, Judea experienced three successive attacks by the Babylonians and the deportation of all but her poorest citizens. The attack in 587 BC, resulting from the rebellion of Judea’s ruler against the Babylonians in 597 BC\(^{12}\), culminated in the siege of Jerusalem which lasted for two years and the destruction of the city. Of greater significance, the Temple was destroyed as well. These represented the unspeakable; the unfathomable. To a faithful Jew of that day and age, Jerusalem and the monarchy could not fail; “Yahweh had further chosen David and promised that his descendents would always occupy the

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throne... in Jerusalem which would stand firm forever... because Yahweh was enthroned in Zion...”

Furthermore, the cycle of *unfaithfulness to the covenant – prophet – reform*, experienced throughout the history of Israel, appeared to have come full circle with the reformation of King Josiah in the early 7th century BC. The closest analog most modern Americans can conjure to understand this type of cultural devastation is the terrorist attacks of 9/11. These represented unspeakable acts of violence on American soil; acts to which Americans previously assumed themselves immune and acts which would change their world view and their way of life in unforeseeable ways and for an unknown duration. This is the type of event that the Book of Lamentations describes, but more so.

The authorship of the Book of Lamentations, like many biblical texts, is contested. Tradition ascribes authorship to the prophet Jeremiah which is supported by the Septuagint. This translation of Hebrew Scripture locates the book after Jeremiah and prefixes the text with:

“And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive, and Jerusalem made desolate, that Jeremias sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said...” (Lam 1 LXX)

Similar ascriptions are found in the Targum and Peshitta but are missing from the Masoretic text. The latter also locates Lamentations among the Writings rather than the Prophets. Since the actual identity of the poet(s) may never be identified, a more appropriate question, posed by Assis and others, regards the number of authors and/or redactors as well as the timeframe for compilation of the final text. Unlike Assis’ theories which rely on the text itself, many scholars attempt to answers these questions in

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order to determine the coherency of the text. Based on the evidence present by Assis and O’Connor and for the purposes of this project, the coherency of the book is assumed regardless of authorship. Most scholars hold that Lamentations was composed in Jerusalem during the Exilic Period and may have served in liturgical functions on the site of the Temple ruins.

**Poetry in Lamentations and the Acrostic Form**

It is not surprising that the Book of Lamentations was written in poetic form. Even in modern times artists turn to this genre to express the inexpressible. The structures and literary devices often employed by the poet, such as metaphor, imagery, alliteration, and hyperbole, to name a few, allow the poet greater freedom to express profound emotion. It was this profound emotion that the author of Lamentations sought to express.

Approximately one third of the Old Testament was written in poetic form. It is an unfortunate reality that many of the features of poetry like meter, rhyme, and alliteration are lost when a poem is translated into a different language. A feature of ancient Hebrew poetry affected by this reality is the acrostic form. In general, acrostics poetry is a form in which the first letter or syllable of each verse, when taken together, hold some meaning. A simple example of an acrostic poem would be:

> Dutiful are his ways,
> Obedience he treasures,
> God’s faithful gift,
> Sent to befriend man.

In this example of a word acrostic, the first letter of each line spells the word which corresponds to the unspoken subject of the poem – *dogs*. The correspondence need not exist in an acrostic poem nor must the device be limited to the first letter; in some examples, the first syllable is
used. In another variation, found in several biblical texts, each verse begins with a letter corresponding to the verse number (v.1 – “a”, v. 2 – “b”, v. 3 – “c”, etc…). Known as an alphabetic acrostic, this form is used throughout Lamentations and, in fact, is the only form of acrostic poem appearing in the Bible.

The example also highlights some important features about acrostics. This poetic form is largely visual rather than auditory; most often, one needs to see and to read the poem in order to fully appreciate the form which may otherwise be missed if the poem is spoken. This limits the possibilities for the purpose a poet would seek to fulfill using an acrostic. In addition, acrostics are much more rigid than other forms of poetry. The following excerpts are provided to demonstrate the visual nature of the acrostic in Lamentations 4 and the variation of form in Lamentations 3:

**Lamentations 4:1–6 (BHS/WIVU)**

1. אנהל נשפך לשאה עיסוקינו ושחרינו נושאים אבריך נשמת ברוך עולם:

2. בין ימי ההקרנים הממולאות תפלה אנו נושאים לעבר את השם יתעף:

3. נשענים החלזון אחר תחפושת מבית замっていくים בפז חסרי:

4. עקך לשון ים ולמחכת בני מנשלים שאלת כל שיר יתעף ויושם:

5. האכילים למעמדם נשענו באלוהי האמנים על חללי הנשים ושפתה:

6. ינ🎁ונמע מתעכל ממושוא סתן מהפוכה כנ娛樂ון ולאחריה בכל ים:

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Lamentations 4:1–6 (BHS/WIVU)
The acrostic form is not unique to Hebrew poetry; there are many examples from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. It is difficult to determine how much influence these neighboring cultures had on the Hebrew usage of acrostics. Some biblical acrostics (albeit incomplete) such as Ps 9-10 and Nah 1 are dated to Judean monarchy. This would predate the Babylonian exile, the most probable period for the introduction of the form into Hebrew literature. Furthermore, most of the examples from neighboring cultures are either name or word acrostics while biblical poets preferred the alphabetic acrostic.

There has been a great deal of conjecture but little scholarship regarding the purpose of the acrostic form. The simplest explanation is that is was used as a mnemonic device or an aid in memorizing the poem. More complex acrostics structures, such as Lamentations 3, defy this

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theory since the repeated use of each letter in the alphabet and the repeated use of leading words in different verses would actually make memorization more difficult. A few early commentators suggested that the acrostic form was associated with some perceived magical power of the alphabet. This may have been true of later poets but there is little evidence to suggest that it was true for ancient Hebrew poetry and few scholars lend credence to it today. Another theory proposes that it could have been used as pedagogy for teaching the alphabet. A more likely candidate is its use as a purely artistic form by which the poet could display his mastery of the language. All of the explanations for these uses of the acrostic form have a common, practical element whether it is memorization, teaching, or to display skill or knowledge, but there are other less utilitarian uses for this form.

The most often cited use of the alphabetic acrostic among these non-utilitarian explanations is an expression of totality. The use of the form in Lamentations could convey that the destruction of Jerusalem was complete just as the alphabet is complete. This can be seen in Chapter 4 which opens with a discussion of the devastation of “precious sons” and continues by describing the plight of mothers and their infants, princes, prophets, and priests. This is far from an exhaustive list of the citizens of Jerusalem but it is enough to convey the idea of the totality of suffering. An additional, more abstract interpretation of the acrostic form extends beyond Chapter 4 to include the entire book. O’Connor and Assis both support the idea that the variations in the acrostic form across the whole of Lamentations hold meaning, perhaps forming a chiasm with Chapter 3 as the crux.

Before moving away from poetry as a general topic, it is worth mentioning that a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to the metrics of Hebrew poetry and its contribution to the interpretation and meaning of the text. For example, Lamentations is often cited as having a “qinah” or limping 3-2 meter which adds to the somber tone of the text. However, as previously mentioned, the meter is generally obliterated by translation and, on account of the multitude of unanswered questions regarding the ancient Hebrew language, the study of this poetic feature does not seem fruitful at this time nor will it be discussed.

The Lament as Genre

A few words about the genre of the lament should be mentioned. Laments occur in many books of the Old Testament including the Psalms and many of the prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah are prominent examples). They generally contain the following elements: a direct address to God, a complaint, words that reassure the speaker, motivation for God to act on the behalf of the speakers, a petition for justice or vengeance, and a vow or promise to praise.\(^\text{17}\) The lament represents not only a unique literary genre in the Bible but a unique way of praying which many modern Christians find frightening. Many of the Old Testament laments direct the anger, frustration, and grief of the people toward God with an underlying faith and trust in God’s love and mercy. The people of Israel knew and trusted in the steadfastness of God to the point where they felt confident in directing their cathartic prayers of lament at Him. This catharsis allowed them to see God’s faithfulness more clearly and return to Him with praise and thanksgiving. Not all of the elements of the classic lament are present in Lamentations, most notably the vow or promise to praise, but the overall effect remains.

\(^{17}\) O’Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears of the World*, 9-10.
Analysis of the Text

The thesis of this paper proposed a demonstration of the use of the alphabetic acrostic form as metaphor in Lamentations 4. Equipped with an understanding of metaphor, the alphabetic acrostic form, and sufficient background on the Book of Lamentations, the demonstration can begin.

Just as the source and target terms or concepts used in a metaphor have associated semantic fields of meaning which are brought into comparison, literary forms often have an associated field of meaning which can be brought into comparison with a concept or term. In the case of the alphabetic acrostic, the alphabet effectively becomes the source term in the metaphor which allows the form to serve as metaphor. To illustrate this point, let us examine the semantic fields that could be associated with the alphabetic acrostic and then search for those concepts within the semantic fields of the text of Lamentations 4.

Semantic Fields Associated with “Alphabet”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field 1</th>
<th>Field 2</th>
<th>Field 3</th>
<th>Field 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet</td>
<td>Completeness (aleph to taw)</td>
<td>The beginning and the end</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative of all words</td>
<td>All that can be written</td>
<td>Nothing more can be written or said</td>
<td>Unspeakable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>智慧</td>
<td>The fear of God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>知识</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>order</td>
<td>Creation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opposition to chaos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number 22</td>
<td>The number of letters of the Hebrew alphabet</td>
<td>The alphabet itself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The concepts of “completeness” and “beginning and end” are rendered from the first concept “all 22 letters.” As previously mentioned, the concept of completeness is a common interpretation of the acrostic form in Lamentations. Chapter 4 surveys the impact of Jerusalem’s destruction from the princes to the smallest child. However, an interesting addition can be made to this meaning by the tertiary field “beginning and end.” Hillers points out the common use of “then and now,” or reminiscence in Lamentations and in Hebrew funeral songs, to which Lamentations is often likened. This is clearly seen in vv. 5, 7, and 8 which speak of the former comforts and grandeur which have been transformed into suffering and humiliation:

5 Those accustomed to dainty food perish in the streets; Those brought up in purple now cling to the ash heaps. (NAB)

7 Brighter than snow were her princes, whiter than milk, More ruddy than coral, more precious than sapphire. (NAB)

8 Now their appearance is blacker than soot, they are unrecognized on the streets; Their skin shrinks on their bones, as dry as wood. (NAB)

The same concept is reflected in the semantic field “beginning and end.” In the beginning, all was well but in the end, all has been destroyed and replaced with suffering and humiliation. In a manner of speaking, two different literary devices have been brought together in a metaphorical way: acrostic and reminiscence.

The second field, “representative of all words,” which yields the fields “nothing more can be written or said” and “unspeakable” are conveyed in the text of Lamentations 4. NAB and others have translated the beginning of v. 1 as “How tarnished is the gold…” but this has been contested by Hillers and Stokes who claim that אֶּזֶז has been mis-pointed as beginning with sin rather than a shin. This would change the translation from “tarnished” to “hated.” This alternate
translation, conveying that gold has become hated or despised, also conveys the concept of the unspeakable. This is conveyed by the acrostic form. A similar occurrence appears in v. 20:

“The anointed one of the Lord, our breath of life, was caught in their snares, He in whose shadow we thought we could live on among the nations.” (NAB)

This recalls the monarchy and the promise made to David that his dynasty would last forever. The fact that the monarchy has fallen along with the destruction of the City of David conveys the unspeakable.

“The number 22” field appears to have little significance but it is included in the discussion due to the lack of an overt acrostic form in Lamentations 5. However, this chapter does contain 22 verses, consistent with three of the remaining four acrostic poems. The analysis of this semantic field helps to illustrate how the acrostic form is implied and how the other three fields might be applied to it as well.

I have saved the remaining field “organization” for the last since it offers perhaps the most significant possible interpretation of the acrostic form. This field can convey the concepts of “order”, “creation”, and “opposition to chaos” which play an important role in Lamentations and in a key theological theme. Taking Lamentations 4 as the paradigm, the text is rife with the unspeakable, both metaphorically and literally. Gold has become worthless (v. 1), the promise of the monarchy has been voided (v. 20), the lofty have been humbled (vv. 5, 7, and 8), and the people have resorted to cannibalism (v. 10). The remnant of Israel are literally experiencing anarchy – the lack of law and order; the lack of peace and security. V. 18 helps to complete this portrait which might also be described as chaos:
Men dogged our steps so that we could not walk in our streets;  
Our end drew near, and came; our time had expired. (*NAB*)

We have hunted for our little ones, that they should not walk in our streets.  
Our time has drawn nigh, our days are fulfilled, our time is come. (*LXX*)

In contrast, the acrostic form appears to oppose this chaos by conveying order. By conveying the concept of order in the midst of chaos, the poet has achieved the goal of allowing the cathartic movement through the text while at the same time conveying hope. The lament element missing from Lamentations, the final vow or promise to praise, is perhaps made present through the acrostic form’s conveyance of hope.

**Conclusions**

It has been successfully demonstrated that a poetic form such as the alphabetic acrostic can convey meaning. This meaning may or may not be reflected explicitly in the text; the form may also convey an unspoken meaning which the poet wished to convey. In the course of this study, the acrostic form in Lamentations 4 was shown to convey a sense of completeness, and the fact that the unspeakable has occurred, both of which are explicitly developed in the text. In addition, a sense of hope is conveyed by the acrostic form through its imposition of order in opposition to the chaos described in the text. This meaning is not explicitly developed in Lamentations 4 but appears to be a key theological theme that the poet wished to impart.

One of the features that allows for this phenomena is the fact that the alphabetic acrostic form can represent the same semantic field as the word “alphabet.” This fact leaves the door open for other poetic features as well. A case in point is the use of reminiscence in poetry, especially in the genre of the lament or funeral song. This poetic device could be attached to similar semantic fields that convey a sense of totality, completeness, or contrast.
Several aspects of this research deserved more development than time permitted. Foremost among these is the impact of cognitive model theories on the development and use of metaphor. The model I presented for use in this research touches on some of these theories in its inclusion of relativity based on the cultural and historical setting but further time to research this area would be helpful. In addition, the scope of this research was limited to Lamentations 4 but early in the research it became obvious that, at least in terms of the acrostic form in relation to its use as metaphor, the Book of Lamentations is a coherent, unified work which is very difficult to dissect. The entire book is rich with metaphor and it would be interesting to continue to expand this research further into Chapter 1, 2, 3, and 5.
Bibliography:

General Sources


Methodological Sources


Specific Sources


Appendix A: Notes on Analysis of the Text

Lamentations 4 (NAB)

1 HOW tarnished is the gold, how changed the noble metal;  
How the sacred stones lie strewn at every street corner!

2 Zion's precious sons, fine gold their counterpart,  
Now worth no more than earthen jars made by the hands of a potter!

3 Even the jackals bare their breasts and suckle their young;  
The daughter of my people has become as cruel as the ostrich in the desert.

4 The tongue of the suckling cleaves to the roof of its mouth in thirst;  
The babes cry for food, but there is no one to give it to them.

5 Those accustomed to dainty food perish in the streets;  
Those brought up in purple now cling to the ash heaps.

6 The punishment of the daughter of my people is greater than the penalty of Sodom,  
Which was overthrown in an instant without the turning of a hand.

7 Brighter than snow were her princes, whiter than milk,  
More ruddy than coral, more precious than sapphire.

8 Now their appearance is blacker than soot, they are unrecognized on the streets;  
Their skin shrinks on their bones, as dry as wood.

9 Better for those who perish by the sword than for those who die of hunger,  
Who waste away, as though pierced through, lacking the fruits of the field!

10 The hands of compassionate women boiled their own children,  
To serve them as mourners' food in the downfall of the daughter of my people

11 The LORD has spent his anger, poured out his blazing wrath;
He has kindled a fire in Zion that has consumed her foundations.

12 The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the world's inhabitants, That enemy or foe could enter the gates of Jerusalem.

13 Because of the sins of her prophets and the crimes of her priests, Who shed in her midst the blood of the just!—

14 They staggered blindly in the streets, soiled with blood, So that people could not touch even their garments:

15 "Away you unclean!" they cried to them, "Away, away, do not draw near!"

If they left and wandered among the nations, nowhere could they remain.

16 The LORD himself has dispersed them, he regards them no more; He does not receive the priests with favor, nor show kindness to the elders.

17 Our eyes ever wasted away, looking in vain for aid; From our watchtower we watched for a nation that could not save us.

18 Men dogged our steps so that we could not walk in our streets; Our end drew near, and came; our time had expired.

19 Our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the air, They harassed us on the mountains and waylaid us in the desert.

20 The anointed one of the LORD, our breath of life, was caught in their snares, He in whose shadow we thought we could live on among the nations.

21 Though you rejoice and are glad, O daughter Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz, To you also shall the cup be passed; you shall become drunk and naked.

22 Your chastisement is completed, O daughter Zion, he will not prolong your exile; But your wickedness, O daughter Edom, he will punish, he will lay bare your sins.
How do I determine the unit (or pericope) I will analyze?

I chose Lamentations 4 because it is a complete acrostic poem of moderate length. The fact that it is complete indicates that this is probably an entire unit as intended by the poet. Despite the fact that the unit is easily identifiably as a poetic unit, the additional questions may prove useful.

Who speaks?

Within this larger pericope several smaller units can be identified. It appears to be the unknown poet narrating throughout the poem but some interesting changes in voice occur. In vv. 1-16 he is a third person narrator (vv. 1-10 describing the aftermath of the siege of Jerusalem, vv. 11-16 describing the causes of the disaster). Even though v. 15 occurs within this second unit, it appears to be a transition in narration since the poet quotes the people of Jerusalem (NAB uses quotation marks but MT has no marker (לָמָּה) indicating a direct quote nor does LXX; there might actual be a change of voice here).

A change in voice clearly occurs in vv. 17-20 (shift from third person narration to first). There is also a shift in tone here as well; the narrator shifts his focus from God as the cause of the destruction to Jerusalem’s enemies. A third shift occurs in vv. 21-22; here the poet/narrator is addressing the enemies of Jerusalem directly.
Is there a common theme among the verses?

Again, the common theme throughout Chapter 4 is the grief over the destruction of Jerusalem but, as stated above, more specific, coherent themes can be identified in subunits of the text. It appears common for commentators to divide the chapter into four subunits. The following is from O’Connor (*Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, Pg. 59):

vv. 1-10: Everything grows dim
vv. 11-16: Why this has happened
vv. 17-20: Retelling of the invasion
vv. 21-22: Future reversals

I agree with these general divisions but not so much with her abbreviated descriptions.

Overall, my conclusion is that for other purposes, a smaller unit could be selected from this chapter but since I am examining the use of the acrostic device, the entire chapter must be considered.

When I have identified the unit I will analyze, what metaphors or similes are used in the text? Identify the semantic fields or fields of meaning (the source and the target domains) these poetic devices bring into relationship.

vv. 1-2 Metaphor is introduced in v. 1 and later defined in v. 2. Zion’s precious sons are compared to gold and precious stones. Who are the “precious sons”? Are they the inhabitants of Jerusalem in general or a specific class of inhabitants like the aristocracy who were taken into exile? Also, Zion is personified as a parent having sons (a male or female parent is unclear
at this point). What are the precious stones? Do these refer to jewels, thus corresponding to the metaphor of gold? Are they the altar stones or stones of the Temple? Are these the stones on the priestly vestments?

V. 2 continues the metaphor comparing the sons to earthen jars (as opposed to some other, more expensive type of jar?). Stokes suggests a different translation for “tarnish”. He holds that the it is *sin* rather than *shin* in the word שְׁנִיתָי which should therefore be translated as “hated”.

“Hated” is more contextual with sacred stones (jewels or otherwise) being tossed careless in the street like refuse. Either translation works for the following metaphor: gold tarnishing and gold being hated are unspeakable just as the destruction of Jerusalem and the downfall of “her sons”.

“Hated” could also be used in comparison to the sons: gold which was once prized above all metals is now hated; Zion’s sons once prized above all men are now hated (by God?).

vv. 3-4 Simile is introduced comparing the mothers in Jerusalem (daughter of my people) to animals jackals and ostriches. The jackal is reviled but at least it cares for its young. The use of the ostrich image is a reference back to Job 39:13-16 regarding how the ostrich abandons its eggs in the sand.

“Daughter of my people” may be a metaphor for to the city of Jerusalem itself; it formerly offered protection for its inhabitants but now has left them uncared for. In v.4 the references to starving babies could be a literal reference to the starvation that would have occurred in the city during the
siege or it may be a continuation of the city metaphor and the babies represent all the inhabitants of the city.

v. 6 “The daughter of my people” is used again and her punishment is compared to that of Sodom. The fact that “daughter” is now compared with another city seems to confirm the metaphor hinted at in vv. 3-4: “daughter of my people” is the city of Jerusalem.

vv. 7-8 Images of snow, milk, coral, and sapphire are used to describe the princes of the city. Brightness and whiteness seem to be references to purity. If this is the case then the poet is reminiscing on times when the rulers of Judea were righteous and in God’s favor (or seemingly in His favor). The reference to coral and sapphire allude to v. 1; in v. 7 the princes were once worth something (again reminiscence) but now, as stated in v. 7, they are worthless. In v. 8 they are blacker than soot – they are no longer pure and clean. This appears to foreshadow the impurity mentioned in vv. 13-15 except the princes have now become prophets and priests.

vv. 9-10 These are particularly gruesome images of starvation and desperation which may have occurred under siege.

v. 11 Conventional metaphors of anger are used (blazing, fire, consumed).

vv. 13-15 A description of the defilement of the priests and prophets of Jerusalem. Although this is probably a dramatization, it can probably be read literally – the sins of the religious leaders had caused their defilement and stirred the anger of God.
v. 18 Conventional metaphor for an enemy: “they dogged our steps.” They chased us like dogs. MT uses יַלְחוֹמ (he hunts) – NAB & NRSV use the same “dogged”. LXX offers a completely different version: “We have hunted for our little ones, that they should not walk in our streets.” The enemy as huntsman metaphor seems more contextual as seen in vv.19-20.

v. 19 Pursuers (or enemies) are eagles – swift, birds of prey, unclean animals.

v. 20 The anointed one of the Lord – the king – was breath of life. This metaphor compares the monarchy to life itself in Jerusalem.

v. 21 Edom, which conspired with the Babylonians against Jerusalem, is personified by referring to its inhabitants as “daughters”. This is followed by a string of conventional metaphors: the cup shall pass – it shall come to pass, drunk & naked – you shall be put to shame.

v. 22 Jerusalem is again personified as a daughter.

What stylistic devices are present in the text I have chosen?

This is an alphabetic acrostic poem.

There is some parallelism, generally wholly contained within the first line of each cola but not always.

v. 1 gold; noble metal
v. 2 sons; gold
v. 4 tongue of the suckling cleaves…; babes cry for food
v. 5 accustomed to dainty food; brought up in purple
v. 7 snow; milk and coral; sapphire
v. 9 parish by the sword; pierced through
die of hunger; waste away; lacking the fruits.

v. 11 anger; wrath; fire; consume

v. 15 left to wander; nowhere could they remain

v. 16 dispersed; does not receive
regards no more; nor shows kindness

v. 20 anointed one; he in whose shadow…

(Consult Alter for other stylistic devices that are common in Hebrew poetry.)

Reminiscence is common in the lament (Hillers 88). It is used in vv. 5, 6, and 7.
Interestingly, vv. 5 and 7 reminisce to better days while v. 7 reminisces on evil times.

**What theological theme or story does the analysis of the first three steps uncover? Propose this as a theoretical interpretation of the text.**

This chapter and the entire book could represent the classical deuteronomistic theology of God blesses the faithful and punishes the unfaithful. This is vv. 13-15 would support this theology. Several of the scenes described in Chapter 4 (v. 10) recall the punishments if Israel should break the covenant (Deut 28:53-57).

The book as a whole could be seen as a theodicy – an attempt to resolve the presence of great evil and suffering in the world with the presence of God. Unlike other theodicies (Job) the voice of God is absent in Lamentations. Boase names six types of theodicies: retributive, educative, eschatological, mystery, communion, and human determinism. Retributive is similar to deuteronomistic theology – there is a lack of specificity in the types of sins that would warrant this. Educative teaches lesson through suffering. Communion and human determinism theodicies attempt to bring man closer to
God through suffering. Lamentations does not display the classical characteristic of any single one of these but contains elements similar to some of them.

I believe the lament contains a theology of its own. The classical elements of the lament include: direct address to God, complaint, words that reassure the speaker, motivation for God to act on the behalf of the speakers, petition for justice or vengeance, and a vow to promise or praise (O’Connor 9-10). I believe what this pattern shows is an underlying faith and trust in God’s love and mercy. The God of Israel is a God that can allow unspeakable evil to exist or destroy it in an instant but above all, He is steadfast and faithful to Israel. Israel demonstrates their confidence in His steadfastness by venting their anger, frustration, and grief toward God, knowing that He will remain faithful. After this catharsis, Israel is once again free to praise God and return to Him. Not all of the elements of the classic lament are present in Lamentations – there appears to be pieces of several theologies represented – but I think this theology of lament is very strong.