

STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS. By Norman K. Gottwald.
(S.C.M. Press; 8s.)

Lamentations, well known to Catholics from its use at *Tenebrae*, is often considered an expression of tragic grief and nothing more. The present study brings out also its importance for Biblical theology. Lamentations must be read in the light of its historical situation, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Its actual authorship is less important: what matters is the light it sheds and the influence it exerted on the Jews faced with the great disaster. It is no mere appendage to Jeremiah's prophecies, but has a place of its own.

The book of Lamentations is remarkable for the artificiality of its form, a series of acrostic poems, combined with the spontaneity of its feeling. The alphabetical acrostics were less, Mr Gottwald thinks, an aid to memory than symbolic of the completeness with which the historical situation was envisaged: from Aleph to Tau; from A to Z, as we should say; and this, not in one poem, but in five. The literary category to which they belong is, of course, the lament; but not of a single type. They are a mixture of the national lament, the individual lament, and the dirge, reflecting the universality of the disaster.

What is the attitude of Lamentations in face of national defeat and destruction? First there is a realization, full and sincere, of sin and divine punishment: a theology of doom, that is, of judgment. The nation is at the nadir of misfortune. Clear in the writer's mind was the teaching of Deuteronomy, that obedience and prosperity, sin and temporal disaster, go hand in hand. Judah, then, has sinned; Yahweh, her own God, has punished. Her misfortune is due, not to his impotence, but to his justice. Suffering has led, not to the loss of faith, but to acknowledgment of sin. The message of the prophets is re-affirmed, that God's will is righteousness; religion and morality must be inseparable.

This realization of God's judgment is the ground of hope. The poet is no apocalyptic seer. There is no finely wrought description of future glory to set against present gloom. But because God is just, he can be implored; he has fully punished, therefore he will forgive. Moreover, Yahweh loves his people; he does not afflict them 'from the heart'; his mercies are 'new every morning'. And he is transcendent, the Most High; good and evil fortunes are both from him; as he has given punishment, so he can give repentance. It is this faith, this submissiveness and hope in time of utmost disaster, so Mr Gottwald has shown, that gives its religious value to Lamentations; and these the book was to hand on to Judaism in the centuries to come, until, we may add, they found full expression in Christ.

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