COVENANT IN DIALOGUE? THE CASE OF LAMENTATIONS 3

Manfred P. Hedley
King's College London

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT AND WIDER PROJECT

This paper reflects research undertaken throughout the second year of my doctoral research, which seeks to examine the extent to which the theme and language of covenant influences and shapes the book of Lamentations, with particular attention given to the utilisation of poetic voices to draw contrasting theological ideas into dialogue with one another.

Ever since N. Gottwald's seminal monograph *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (1954), scholars have recognised the influence of theological ideas, which underpin the poetry and shape its expression, as it seeks to respond to the distress and confusion of sixth-century BCE Jerusalem. Scholarship continues to expand its view, not only of the breadth of concepts, beliefs and traditions that are to be found in the book, but also of the complex way they interact to produce poems of raw emotion, spiritual depth, and literary intricacy. In recent years, attention has turned towards the function of poetic voices and personae, and scholars have increasingly recognised the importance of polyphony and dialogue as literary constructs that enable the poet(s) to view the desperate circumstances being endured from different emotional, prayerful and theological perspectives.

Among the various theological perspectives that have been identified, one theme that is rarely mentioned is Yahweh's covenant with his people. It has been argued that the absence of the term **ברית**, as well as its most closely associated verb **כרת**, shows that it was an unknown concept at the time of the book's composition. However, the presence of other themes, concepts and terminology in Lamentations that are elsewhere closely associated with covenant would seem to contradict such an argument. Upon closer inspection, it appears that these themes, concepts and terms reside in contrasting covenantal traditions, which draw the poet(s) to cry out against Yahweh for breaking his promise to favour them with one breath, only to confess their own broken promise to obey him with another. Moreover, when these themes, concepts and terms are 'mapped' over the voices in each poem, what emerges is a sense of dialogue between differing covenantal perspectives that takes place within each poem and across the entire book.

This paper specifically focuses on Lamentations 3, the poem within this short anthology that most clearly includes both dialogue and language that is elsewhere associated with covenant, to explore the way this literary technique has shaped what has so often been identified as the cornerstone of the whole book. Specifically, this paper will prioritise laying out the foundations of the argument, which are located in the identification of covenantal ideology as well as the delineation of the multiple poetic voices that are active throughout the poem. With respect to covenant, it will be argued that there is evidence in the text that at least two covenantal traditions were known to the poet and form an important undercurrent to the language and themes of the poem. With respect to poetic voices, contrary to some scholars who recognise only one dominant speaker, who identifies himself as **הגבר** (Lam 3:1), it will be argued that in fact three voices are active throughout the poem: **הגבר** (Lam 3:1-24, 34-36, 48-66), a Wisdom correspondent (Lam 3:25-33, 37-41), and the Jerusalem community (Lam 3:42-47).

Although the paper is focused on making a detailed presentation of these two foundational issues, it will conclude with a brief discussion about how these elements come together in dialogue. Drawing on key insights from the influential dialogic theory of M. Bakhtin (with a particular focus in this paper on dialogic meaning, the independence of voices in polyphonic discourse, and the dialogism of ideas), this discussion will argue that Lamentations 3 represents a complex interaction of contrasting ideas about covenant, not to prioritise one over another, or to resolve the conflict between them, but to enable the poet to bring some sense of order to their own conflicted and chaotic response to the crisis they face, and in the end to find the words to express their grief.