

## 7. The Book of Lamentations— A Survey of its Numerical Features

### Compositional Structure of the Book as a Whole

The number **22**, signifying the letters of the alphabet, fundamentally determines the structure of the Book of Lamentations. It is designed as a series of alphabetic acrostics, concluded by Chapter 5, which is a non-acrostic alphabetizing poem with its 22 verselines. As I shall demonstrate below, this is not due to carelessness, but a matter of conscious design.

In contrast to what I do with other texts, in this case, I refrain from offering a full logotechnical analysis, because the layout of the text in BHS is neatly arranged and surveyable. In addition, I do not attempt to investigate the poetic structure of the book in terms of cantos and strophes, but limit myself to only registering its overall numerical features in terms of Masoretic verses, poetic verselines, and words.

The Hebrew text is in a relatively good condition, but for a few minor and understandable scribal errors, which must be sorted out beforehand.

In 1:6a, the words **מִן־בַּת־צִיּוֹן**, 'from the daughter of Zion', of the Ketib reading is suspect and should be read as suggested in the Qere reading, **מִבַּת־צִיּוֹן**. See BHS.

In 1:16b the two words **עֵינַי עֵינַי**, 'my eye, my eye' (usually translated 'my eyes'), is obviously a matter of dittography, and one word should be deleted. Note that the Masoretes have a paseq-slash between the two words, which is in this case a device to mark the dittography. See BHS.

In 4:3d the words **כִּי עֵינַיִם**, 'for the eyes', is unintelligible and should be read as one word: **כִּי־עֵינַיִם**, 'like ostriches' (following Qere, many Hebrew manuscripts and the ancient versions). See BHS.

The first word in 5:5a, **עַל**, 'on', is an obvious haplography and should be read **עַל עַל**, 'a yoke on (our shoulders)'. See BHS.

The total number of words in the corrected text is **1540**, which is most significant: **1540 = 70 x 22**, exactly **10x** the **154** Masoretic verses.<sup>1</sup> Another striking feature is that Chapter 1 is significantly made up of **374 (17 x 22)** words, which divide into two exactly equal parts (according to Van der Lugt, Canto I and Canto II): **187 (11x17)** words in vs. 1-11, and **187** in vs. 12-22. The division of the text into two mathematically equal sections of **11** Masoretic verses each is evidently conscious design.

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<sup>1</sup> Compared with the text of Lamentations, that of the Book of Esther is in a lesser state of repair, seeing the larger number of proposals for emendation. In my judgement, there are two that deserve the qualification 'necessary'. First, in 5:4b, I propose to delete the word **הַיּוֹם**, 'today', as superfluous. In fact, it is absent in a number of Hebrew manuscripts and in the Syriac Version (see BHS).

Second, the word **וְאֲשֶׁר**, 'and which', in 6:8b should also be deleted. There is no need to delete the whole clause (with Gunkel, et al.), which is lacking in the Greek translations. It should be retained as a meaningful detail about the horse, as rightly pointed out by A. Loader (ATD 16/2, 1992, p. 256), but then, in my opinion, without the relative particle **וְאֲשֶׁר**. Moreover, the niph'al should be read as a participle: **נִתְּן כִּתְּרָה**, literally, 'given/provided with a headdress'. I propose the following translation:

"Let there be brought a royal robe the king himself has worn, and a horse on which the king rides, provided with a royal headdress on its head." Compare *HALOT*, Vol. 2, 506.

These two minor corrections result in the following spectacular compositional formula of the book:

**3043 (179x17)** words in total, with **1802 (106x17)** before, and **1241 (73x17)** after the *atnach*.

I sincerely hope that such numerical features will elicit a fresh discussion on the benchmarks for textual criticism and our estimation of the biblical text. My experience with the logotechnical analysis of biblical texts has led to a deeper understanding, on my part, of their compositional form and aroused in me a greater appreciation of the literary craftsmanship of the biblical writers. Inevitably this evoked in me a great measure of reticence and restraint when it comes to emending MT.

However, there is another remarkable numerical aspect that meets the eye immediately in the following overview: the **67** verselines in each of Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapters	Masoretic Verses	Poetic Verselines	Words
1	22	67	<b>374</b>
2	22	67	381
3	66	<b>66</b>	381
4	22	<b>44</b>	259
5	22	<b>22</b>	145
Total	<b>154</b>	266	<b>1540</b>

The **67** verselines clearly stand out as 'irregular' in the otherwise very regular pattern in terms of the Masoretic verses and also in Chapters 3-5, with **66** in Chapter 3 and **66** in Chapters 4-5. This irregularity may tentatively be explained as revealing two compositional stages of the text. In the first stage, Chapters 1-2 may indeed have had **66** verselines each, if we leave the extra 5-word verseline in each chapter (1:7d and 2:19d) out of consideration.

This gives the following picture of the original form of the text, which is striking in regards the total number of verselines and the total number of words:

Chapters	Masoretic Verses	Poetic Verselines	Words
1	22	66	369
2	22	66	376
3	66	66	381
4	22	44	259
5	22	22	145
Total	<b>154</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>1530</b>

Then the text had **264** ( $12 \times 22$ ) verselines (parallel to the **154** ( $7 \times 22$ ) Masoretic verses), with **1530** ( $90 \times 17$ ) words. But there is more to it. If we differentiate between **alphabetic** and **non-alphabetic** verselines, we get the following intriguing picture:

**Chapter 1** has 22 sets of 1 **alphabetic**, and 2 **non alphabetic** verselines:  $22+44=66$

**Chapter 2** has 22 sets of 1 **alphabetic**, and 2 **non alphabetic** verselines:  $22+44=66$

**Chapter 3** has 22 sets of 3 **alphabetic verselines**: **66**

**Chapter 4** has 22 sets of 1 **alphabetic**, and 1 **non alphabetic** verselines:  $22+22=44$

**Chapter 5** has 22 sets of 1 **non-alphabetic** verseline: **22**.

There are altogether **132** ( $6 \times 22$ ) **alphabetic** and **132** ( $6 \times 22$ ) **non-alphabetic** verselines.

The perfect parity between **alphabetic** and **non-alphabetic** verselines provides us, at last, with a plausible explanation for the lack of alphabetic acrostics in Chapter 5, which is not due to carelessness on the part of the author, but a matter of deliberate design for the sake of a perfect balance between alphabetic and non-alphabetic verselines in the book.

Another distinct feature of the book is the conspicuous use and non-use of the *atnach*. It is only in Chapters 1, 2 and 4 that we find the verse divider. To my knowledge, there is no explanation for this phenomenon.

Here is an overview of the alphabetic and non-alphabetic verselines:

Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4	Chapter 5
1a <b>Aleph</b> 1b non-alphabetic 1c non-alphabetic	1a <b>Aleph</b> 1b non-alphabetic 1c non-alphabetic	1 <b>Aleph</b> 2 <b>Aleph</b> 3 <b>Aleph</b>	1a <b>Aleph</b> 1b non-alphabetic	1 non-alphabetic
2a <b>Beth</b> 2b non-alphabetic 2c non-alphabetic	2a <b>Beth</b> 2b non-alphabetic 2c non-alphabetic	4 <b>Beth</b> 5 <b>Beth</b> 6 <b>Beth</b>	2a <b>Beth</b> 2b non-alphabetic	2 non-alphabetic
3a <b>Gimel</b> 3b non-alphabetic 3c non-alphabetic	3a <b>Gimel</b> 3b non-alphabetic 3c non-alphabetic	7 <b>Gimel</b> 8 <b>Gimel</b> 9 <b>Gimel</b>	3a <b>Gimel</b> 3b non-alphabetic	3 non-alphabetic
4a <b>Daleth</b> 4b non-alphabetic 4c non-alphabetic	4a <b>Daleth</b> 4b non-alphabetic 4c non-alphabetic	10 <b>Daleth</b> 11 <b>Daleth</b> 12 <b>Daleth</b>	4a <b>Daleth</b> 4b non-alphabetic	4 non-alphabetic
5a <b>Heh</b> 5b non-alphabetic 5c non-alphabetic	5a <b>Heh</b> 5b non-alphabetic 5c non-alphabetic	13 <b>Heh</b> 14 <b>Heh</b> 15 <b>Heh</b>	5a <b>Heh</b> 5b non-alphabetic	5 non-alphabetic
6a <b>Waw</b> 6b non-alphabetic 6c non-alphabetic	6a <b>Waw</b> 6b non-alphabetic 6c non-alphabetic	16 <b>Waw</b> 17 <b>Waw</b> 18 <b>Waw</b>	6a <b>Waw</b> 6b non-alphabetic	6 non-alphabetic
7a <b>Zayin</b> 7b non-alphabetic 7c non-alphabetic 7d non-alphabetic	7a <b>Zayin</b> 7b non-alphabetic 7c non-alphabetic	19 <b>Zayin</b> 20 <b>Zayin</b> 21 <b>Zayin</b>	7a <b>Zayin</b> 7b non-alphabetic	7 non-alphabetic
8a <b>Cheth</b> 8b non-alphabetic 8c non-alphabetic	8a <b>Cheth</b> 8b non-alphabetic 8c non-alphabetic	22 <b>Cheth</b> 23 <b>Cheth</b> 24 <b>Cheth</b>	8a <b>Cheth</b> 8b non-alphabetic	8 non-alphabetic
9a <b>Teth</b> 9b non-alphabetic 9c non-alphabetic	9a <b>Teth</b> 9b non-alphabetic 9c non-alphabetic	25 <b>Teth</b> 26 <b>Teth</b> 27 <b>Teth</b>	9a <b>Teth</b> 9b non-alphabetic	9 non-alphabetic
10a <b>Yodh</b> 10b non-alphabetic 10c non-alphabetic	10a <b>Yodh</b> 10b non-alphabetic 10c non-alphabetic	28 <b>Yodh</b> 29 <b>Yodh</b> 30 <b>Yodh</b>	10a <b>Yodh</b> 10b non-alphabetic	10 non-alphabetic
11a <b>Kaph</b> 11b non-alphabetic 11c non-alphabetic	11a <b>Kaph</b> 11b non-alphabetic 11c non-alphabetic	31 <b>Kaph</b> 32 <b>Kaph</b> 33 <b>Kaph</b>	11a <b>Kaph</b> 11b non-alphabetic	11 non-alphabetic
12a <b>Lamedh</b> 12b non-alphabetic 12c non-alphabetic	12a <b>Lamedh</b> 12b non-alphabetic 12c non-alphabetic	34 <b>Lamedh</b> 35 <b>Lamedh</b> 36 <b>Lamedh</b>	12a <b>Lamedh</b> 12b non-alphabetic	12 non-alphabetic
13a <b>Mem</b> 13b non-alphabetic 13c non-alphabetic	13a <b>Mem</b> 13b non-alphabetic 13c non-alphabetic	37 <b>Mem</b> 38 <b>Mem</b> 39 <b>Mem</b>	13a <b>Mem</b> 13b non-alphabetic	13 non-alphabetic
14a <b>Nun</b> 14b non-alphabetic 14c non-alphabetic	14a <b>Nun</b> 14b non-alphabetic 14c non-alphabetic	40 <b>Nun</b> 41 <b>Nun</b> 42 <b>Nun</b>	14a <b>Nun</b> 14b non-alphabetic	14 non-alphabetic
15a <b>Samekh</b> 15b non-alphabetic 15c non-alphabetic	15a <b>Samekh</b> 15b non-alphabetic 15c non-alphabetic	43 <b>Samekh</b> 44 <b>Samekh</b> 45 <b>Samekh</b>	15a <b>Samekh</b> 15b non-alphabetic	15 non-alphabetic

16a <b>Ayin</b> 16b non-alphabetic 16c non-alphabetic	16a <b>Peh</b> 16b non-alphabetic 16c non-alphabetic	46 <b>Peh</b> 47 <b>Peh</b> 48 <b>Peh</b>	16a <b>Ayin</b> 16b non-alphabetic	16 non-alphabetic
17a <b>Peh</b> 17b non-alphabetic 17c non-alphabetic	17a <b>Ayin</b> 17b non-alphabetic 17c non-alphabetic	49 <b>Ayin</b> 50 <b>Ayin</b> 51 <b>Ayin</b>	17a <b>Peh</b> 17b non-alphabetic	17 non-alphabetic
18a <b>Tsadeh</b> 18b non-alphabetic 18c non-alphabetic	18a <b>Tsadeh</b> 18b non-alphabetic 18c non-alphabetic	52 <b>Tsadeh</b> 53 <b>Tsadeh</b> 54 <b>Tsadeh</b>	18a <b>Tsadeh</b> 18b non-alphabetic	18 non-alphabetic
19a <b>Qoph</b> 19b non-alphabetic 19c non-alphabetic	19a <b>Qoph</b> 19b non-alphabetic 19c non-alphabetic 19d non-alphabetic	55 <b>Qoph</b> 56 <b>Qoph</b> 57 <b>Qoph</b>	19a <b>Qoph</b> 19b non-alphabetic	19 non-alphabetic
20a <b>Resh</b> 20b non-alphabetic 20c non-alphabetic	20a <b>Resh</b> 20b non-alphabetic 20c non-alphabetic	58 <b>Resh</b> 59 <b>Resh</b> 60 <b>Resh</b>	20a <b>Resh</b> 20b non-alphabetic	20 non-alphabetic
21a <b>Sin/Shin</b> 21b non-alphabetic 21c non-alphabetic	21a <b>Sin/Shin</b> 21b non-alphabetic 21c non-alphabetic	61 <b>Sin/Shin</b> 62 <b>Sin/Shin</b> 63 <b>Sin/Shin</b>	21a <b>Sin/Shin</b> 21b non-alphabetic	21 non-alphabetic
22a <b>Taw</b> 22b non-alphabetic 22c non-alphabetic	22a <b>Taw</b> 22b non-alphabetic 22c non-alphabetic	64 <b>Taw</b> 65 <b>Taw</b> 66 <b>Taw</b>	22a <b>Taw</b> 22b non-alphabetic	22 non-alphabetic

Note that Chapters 1 and 4 follow the normal alphabetic order, but for some reason Chapters 2 and 3 have the **Ayin** and **Peh** verselines in the reverse order.

## Observations

1. **Chapter 3** in the middle of the book, with its 381 words has only 5 words more than any other chapter, but is the longest in terms of its 66 Masoretic verses. It is flanked by 44 verses on each side:  $154 = 44 + 66 + 44$ . It also stands out, because it has 22 sets of 3 alphabetic acrostic verselines. This singular device draws extra attention to this chapter as the central core of the book. Another distinct feature of Chapter 3 is its meticulously designed central core, vs. 25-42, in terms of verses right in the middle of the book:  $154 = 68 (4 \times 17) + 18 + 68 (4 \times 17)$ . Moreover, from the perspective of content, Chapter 3 constitutes the turning point in the poem. Here the leading theme, already intimated in verses 19-24, is no longer lament, but hope, self-examination, and conversion based upon Yahweh's mercy. This central core, 3:25-42, can be delimited precisely. It starts most significantly with a conspicuous threefold use of the initial key-word *tob*, 'good,' in verses 25, 26 and 27, and ends with a striking shift from third to second person, addressing Yahweh directly, in verse 42, as in the next section 3:43-45.
2. The Masoretes located the mathematical centre of the book on verse level between verses 33 and 34 - in Codex L at the indentation at the beginning of vs. 34. This is the point of division of the text into two equal halves within the 108 words of vs. 25-42, within the 66 verses of Chapter 3, and within the whole book with its 154 verses:

3:25-42      **9 + 9**    verses in the central core  
3:1-66        **33 + 33**    verses in the central chapter  
1:1-5:22     **77 + 77**    verses in the book as a whole.

The book also appears to have a typical *sevenfold* structure in a menorah pattern:

1.	1:1-22	22 verses	}	<b>68</b> (4 x 17)
2.	2:1-22	22 verses		
3.	3:1-24	24 verses	}	<b>68</b> (4 x 17)
4.	3:25-42	18 verses — mathematical centre		
5.	3:43-66	24 verses	}	<b>68</b> (4 x 17)
6.	4:1-22	22 verses		
7.	5:1-22	22 verses	}	<b>68</b> (4 x 17)

The 18-verse central core is flanked by three branches consisting of **68** (4 x 17) verses on each side. This demonstrates the deliberate use of the holy number 17.

An examination of the central core itself on word level reveals that the number 17 likewise structures it. The 6-word [verse 34](#) at the mathematical centre is flanked by **51** (3 x 17) words on either side, and surrounded by 17 verses (9 + 8):

3:25-33	<b>51</b> words (3 x 17)	<b>9</b> verses--}	} <b>17</b> vss.
<a href="#">3:34</a>	<b>6</b> words	<b>1</b> verse	
3:35-42	<b>51</b> words (3 x 17)	<b>8</b> verses--}	

This structure can hardly be a matter of chance and must be reckoned with in interpreting the book. It means in any case that [3:25-42](#), and [3:34](#) should receive special attention. My analysis has revealed that the central message of the book is hope, self-examination, and conversion based upon Yahweh's mercy. Note also that the "trampling underfoot of all the prisoners of the earth" (v. 34a) is the first thing Yahweh does not approve.

There is another interesting feature in this book I would like to call attention to: the *acrostics* in Chapter 5:1-4 and 19-22. The acrostic is a technique used to form a name, word or phrase with the first letters of successive lines or verses of a text to "encode" a message in it. Alphabetic poems are in fact *alphabetic acrostics*.

In Chapter 5 the author abandoned the principle of the *alphabetic* acrostic but retained the regular number of **22** verses.<sup>2</sup> Instead of the alphabetic acrostic he employed another type of acrostic, using, so far as we can see, not all but only some initial letters. Such an acrostic can be detected in 5:1-4 where the initial letters of the four verses, *z n y m*, spell the word *zonim*, "adulterers." The word obviously refers to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites in their relationship with God (cf. Hosea 4:15). Significantly enough, the number of words in 5:1-4 is **26** (9 in vs. 1 and **17** in vs. 2-4).

Another acrostic appears in 5:19-22, where the initial letters of these four verses spell the word *'eloheka*, "your God." This passage contains an urgent appeal to God to mend and restore his relationship with his people. The acrostic clearly functions to stress the fact that Yahweh is still Israel's God, in spite of their apostasy. However, such acrostic devices were used on a small scale, since they have been detected in a limited number of instances only.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a study of chapter 5 see Siegfried Bergler, "Threni V—nur ein alphabetisierendes Lied? Versuch einer Deutung," *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977), pp. 304-320.

<sup>3</sup> See W. Soll's entry "Acrostic" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I, pp. 58-59, where more literature is cited. For the interesting acrostic and telestic (using the terminal letters of each line) in Nahum 1, see Klaas Spronk, *Nahum. Historical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1997), pp. 22-26, and especially his article "Acrostics in the book of Nahum," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 110 (1998), pp. 209-222, in which more literature is cited. See now also Duane L. Christensen's commentary on Nahum for the Anchor Bible, Yale University Press, 2008.

3. The name YHWH occurs **32** times in the book: **26x** in Chapters 1-3 (**7 + 7 + 12**):  
**1**:5c, 9c, 11c, **12c**, 17b, 18a, 20a – **7x** with the middle instance in v. 12c  
**2**:6b, 7c, 8a, 9c, **17a**, 20a, 22b – **7x** with the middle instance in v. 17a  
**3**:18b, 22a, 24a, 25a, 26b, 40b, 50b, 55a, 59a, 61a, 64a, 66b – **12x**  
and **6x** in Chapters 4-5 (as the only divine name, 3 + 3):  
**4**:11a, 16a, 20a – **3x**  
**5**:1a, 19a, 21a – **3x**.
- The designation Adonay occurs no less than **14** times:  
**1**:14c, 15a, 15c – **3x**  
**2**:1a, 2a, 5a, **7a**, 18a, 19b, 21c – **7x** with the middle instance in v. 7a  
**3**:31b, 36b, 37b, 58a – **4x**.
- Elyon occurs 2x, precisely within the central core of Chapter 3 (3:35b, 38a)  
El appears **1x** (3:41b).  
There are altogether **49 (7 x 7)** references to God.

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