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HOPE IN CONCESSION:  
THE TRANSLATION OF כִּי אֵם IN LAM. 5:22

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### Introduction

Lamentations, also known by its Hebrew title אֵיכָה “How?”, poses unique challenges to biblical scholarship. Despite an apparent lack of cohesion and strange historical treatment of the book, questions of authorship, form, date, purpose, and theology continually hound every generation of biblical studies. What is interesting is how the debate seems to always locate itself on one particular issue: how should translators read כִּי אָם in Lam 5:22?

### The Current Climate

The translations of the phrase varies and takes a number of different forms. There does not seem to be a theological tendency that governs the translation. Liberal and conservative, critical and evangelical alike agree on various different points. There is very little uniformity and so we will look at briefly each of the options before us in our investigation of this question.

- 1) The first option is that of the original JPSV, “Thou canst not have utterly rejected us, and be exceeding wroth against us.” Religious sensitivities may have led to such a reading, for how could Yahweh have rejected his people? To them it is impossible. However, there is no negative in the MT and so this reading must be rejected.<sup>1</sup>
- 2) It is also possible to place כִּי אָם in the interrogative, in line with the RSV, rendering it, “Or hast thou utterly rejected us? Art thou exceedingly angry with us?” The antiquity of this translation stands behind this reading and Westermann gives a good argument for the reasoning.<sup>2</sup> However, the text lacks an interrogative, and several modern scholars disagree.<sup>3</sup>
- 3) Another very classic translation renders כִּי אָם in the *adversative*: “But instead you have

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Gordis, “The Conclusion of the Book of Lamentations[5:22],” *JBL* 93 [1974]; Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations*, AB 7A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 100.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. by Charles Muenchow (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 218-219. John Renkema alters this reading as he sees the emphasis upon what Yahweh desires: “Or do you prefer to reject us forever, to rage against us without measure?” *Lamentations*, HCOT, trans. by Brian Doyle (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 631.

<sup>3</sup> Gordis, “Conclusion of the Book of Lamentations,” 289; cf. Renkema, *Lamentations*, 630.

completely rejected us; you have been very angry with us.” The Targums, Luther, the KJV, and the Vulgate<sup>4</sup> have this translation and modern scholars include Delbert R. Hillers and Adele Berlin.<sup>5</sup> The *adversative* use of אַחַד כִּי is compelling on several grounds, especially if the אַחַד is pleonastic (Williams, §§ 447, 449, 457, 459; BDB, אַחַד כִּי 2b). However, it seems unlikely that this reading should follow the rest of the book. Why should the people offer a prayer if Yahweh has just rejected them?<sup>6</sup>

4) Tod Linafelt proffers a unique suggestion, arguing that the אַחַד כִּי is introducing a protasis with an ellipsis in the apodosis. The lament would then end on an abrupt note with something like, ““For if truly you have rejected us, bitterly raged against us...” Linafelt points to some grammatical precedence for such a reading (Gen. 38:17; Ex. 32:32; Num. 5:20). The ellipsis of the apodosis is seen in grammars (Williams, §597; Joüon, §167r).<sup>7</sup> Linafelt’s proposition has found very little support in the scholarly world as, Berlin points out, this reading does not have much precedence and may be too modern for Ancient Near Eastern poetry.<sup>8</sup>

5) Robert Gordis’ article, “The Conclusion of the Book of Lamentations [5:22],” argues persuasively for translating אַחַד כִּי *concessively* with the pluperfect tense: “even though you had despised us greatly and were very angry with us.”<sup>9</sup> Robin Perry and I. Gous follow this reading with Perry maintaining the perfect tense of the text.<sup>10</sup> We will examine this translation and the critiques leveled against it more thoroughly below.

6) The last option before us is to understand the אַחַד כִּי in a restrictive or limitative sense (Williams, §556) and finds relatively large agreement amongst scholars. Dearman and the ESV give the restrictive reading, “Unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.”<sup>11</sup>

The first four translations find little support in the modern world. The interrogative and the adversative have the most support, but all in all the last two are the most persuasive. This paper will examine the grammatical, literary, and theological evidences in the Book of Lamentations to

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<sup>4</sup> Vulgate, “sed proiciens reppulisti nos iratus es contra nos vehementer.” *But rejecting you have spurned us; you are vehemently angry against us.* My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Hillers seems to be the greatest proponent for this translation, following the historical pedigree of the *adversative*; Hillers, *Lamentations*, 100-101; Adele Berlin, *Lamentations*, OTL (Louisville: WJK, 2004), 115.

<sup>6</sup> See also the targums of Lamentations in *The Targum of Lamentations*, The Aramaic Bible, 17B, trans. by Philip S. Alexander (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Tod Linafelt, “The refusal of a conclusion in the book of Lamentations.” *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 2 (2001 2001): 340-343; see

<sup>8</sup> Berlin, *Lamentations*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Gordis, “Conclusion,” 293.

<sup>10</sup> Robin A. Perry, *Lamentations*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 157; see I. Gous, “Lamentations 5 and the translation of verse 22,” *OTE* 3 (1990), 287-302 for a sustained argument in favor of Gordis’ translation.

<sup>11</sup> J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 474. See also, K&D 8:2:454. Of course, because we are PCA, if the ESV says it, what’s the use in writing a paper on it?

determine the appropriate translation for the phrase. In doing so, I will show that Gordis' translation with Perry's correction is the best understanding grammatically and the one most faithful to the message of the rest of the book.

The strategy of this paper is straight forward. First, I will go through the various understandings of  $\text{כִּי אֵם}$  that may fit in the context of our sentence. The diverse and disparate translations by notable scholars indicates the difficulty of this task. Meanings change as scholars handle the term differently, and theological biases are no small thing. When reading through the vast array of literature, one is left with "the impression that in the translation of the text, grammatical and linguistic objectivity has been undermined by dogmatic considerations which have not always been equally explicit."<sup>12</sup> However, the issue is not just one of grammar as Renkema may have hoped. An effective translation, especially with an issue such as this, holds in view the literary qualities and theological concerns of the rest of the book. We will conclude the paper with a survey of the literary purpose and theological implications of Gordis' translation. What is the rest of the book saying? And why is it saying it? What is the *theology* in view?

### **Grammatical and Syntactical Concerns**

Robert Gordis wrote that "The closing verse in Lamentations is crucial for the meaning and spirit of the entire poem."<sup>13</sup> This is not unique to the Book of Lamentations. However, it does show just how drastic the differences can be amongst the various interpretation of the biblical text. An adversative clause is very different from a hanging protasis. Pessimism rejects optimism, and optimism refuses mindless speculation and existential despair. Such concerns are not just the

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<sup>12</sup> Renkema, *Lamentations*, 630.

<sup>13</sup> Gordis, "Conclusion," 289.

result of literary analysis but arise from the ambiguity of the Hebrew language and syntax.

In this section we will look at two scholarly lexicons, Brown-Driver-Briggs (referred as *BDB* in the text), and Koehler-Baumgartner (referred to as *KBL* in the text). Looking at the clusters of meaning for כִּי אִם, we will examine the two options before us, the restrictive “unless” and the concessive “even though,” in sequential order.

Both *BDB* and *KBL* deal with כִּי אִם rather extensively. As would expect, there isn't much difference in the way they treat the different meanings. Functionally, there are two basic ways כִּי אִם can operate in a sentence: each particle “retaining its independent force, and relating to a different clause,”<sup>14</sup> or as a “logical unit” conjoined, and relating to one clause.<sup>15</sup> In many ways, this sums up the problem between the two translations: do the particles כִּי אִם work independently of each other, or do they function conjointly?

#### כִּי אִם as *Restrictive*

The first option before us is the restrictive or limitative, “unless.” My own translation of v. 22, with the restrictive, reads, “unless you have utterly rejected us, and are exceedingly angry with us.” What is the lexical and grammatical evidence for this translation, and where else does it appear in the MT?

There is no doubt that this is the popular reading amongst scholars. *BDB* places Lam. 5:22, קִצְפֹתָ עָלֵינוּ עַד-מְאֹד כִּי אִם-מָאֵס מְאֹסָתָנוּ, in the *restrictive* meaning of כִּי אִם. However, we must ask the question, what are the grammatical prerequisites for the *restrictive* use? Here is where the difficulty lies. *BDB* understands כִּי אִם as limiting the preceding clause if the preceding clause is a

<sup>14</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles Briggs, “כִּי אִם,” *BDB* 474.

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Koehler, and Walter Baumgartner, “כִּי אִם,” *KBL*, 471.

*negative, an oath, or a question.*<sup>16</sup>

Some grammars require the negative to precede this translation of כִּי אִם (Williams, §556). Ewald argues for a slight shift in meaning, “כִּי אִם *except*, comes at least to be merely a stronger *or* than the simple אִם; it states another case, and yet still continues to be construed with the perfect, Lam. 5:22” (Ewald, §356*b*). Rather than working within the confines of a simple restrictive, Ewald tries to apply a correlative force to כִּי אִם. If this is the case, the translator would place a virtual “either” in the v. 21 before the imperative: “[Either] cause us to return, O Lord, to yourself and we will repent...*or* you have utterly rejected us; you have been exceedingly angry with us.” In better prose this would simply be rendered with the option before us, “unless.”<sup>17</sup>

Ewald’s solution is interesting. It may very well have strong backing in other parts of the grammars. If the restrictive is changed to not require a negative in the preceding clause, and the *unless* is understood as correlative, the meaning of the verse is retained without the grammatical constraints. While interesting, this would be the only instance that Ewald gives in his grammar. No precedent exists for this option. However, numerous examples exist for the restrictive as classically understood.

Gen. 32:27b, וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָּ כִּי אִם-בֵּרַכְתָּנִי      “And he said, ‘I will not let you go *unless* you bless me.’”<sup>18</sup>

Lev. 22:6b, וְלֹא יֵאָכֵל מִן-הַקֹּדְשִׁים כִּי אִם-רָחַץ      “And he shall not eat from the sacrificial food *unless* he has washed.”

<sup>16</sup> BDB, 474.

<sup>17</sup> C. F. Keil follows this translation of “unless,” but understands the text in a very different way than the standard restrictive clause: ““This case is, however, is merely stated as a possibility, the actual occurrence of which is out of the question. The idea is the same as that expressed by Jeremiah (Jer. 14:19) in the form of a question, in order to give the greater emphasis to his intercession for his nation. The Lord cannot have utterly rejected his people Israel, because He would thereby make His name to be despised in the eyes of the nations (Jer. 14:21).” K&D, 8:2:454.

<sup>18</sup> Translations in the text are my own unless otherwise noted.

Ruth 3:18, כִּי לֹא יִשְׁקֹט הָאִישׁ כִּי־אֵם־כָּלָה

“For the man will not be silent *unless* he has finished.”

The evidence is strong that the restrictive/exceptive clause follows the negative. While the sampling size is small of my own translations, there is great agreement that this is the case (GKC, 163c).<sup>19</sup> Every other instance of **כִּי אֵם** being used restrictively follows a main clause that contains a negative.

What of the concessive sense, though? Are there grammatical grounds for understanding **כִּי אֵם** as referring to the circumstances of the main clause? We will now look at the evidence for translating **כִּי אֵם** as “even though/for though.”

#### **כִּי אֵם** as *Concessive*

The lexicons give a wide semantic range for **כִּי אֵם**, and one of the finer points of that range with only a few instances is the one before us. As mentioned above, there are two frames for **כִּי אֵם**: independent force and codependent force. If **כִּי אֵם** did function as two independent particles, each retaining their own force, in Lam. 5:22, this may make more sense in the context.

Robert Gordis argues for this translation in both his article, “The Conclusion to the Book of Lamentations,” and his commentary.<sup>20</sup> While Gous and Perry follow him, it has not received as much attention in the popular translations. That is not to say that it is not correct but that many push back against the idea that **כִּי אֵם** refers to the attendant circumstances of the main clause.

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<sup>19</sup> See Paul M. Joyce and Diana Lipton, *Lamentations Through the Centuries* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 190; Perry, *Lamentations*, 155; Linafelt, “Refusal of a Conclusion,” 341; Gordis, “Conclusion,” 290; “Yet the parallel cited, and all other cases where *ki'im* has to be translated “unless” are only apparent, not genuine, for in these other cases it is used after a clause containing or implying a negative; the clause following *ki'im* states a condition that must be fulfilled before the preceding statement can or should be in effect: “Not A, unless N.” Hillers, *Lamentations*, 100

<sup>20</sup> Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974).

Gordis backs up his argument with three basic points: syntactical similarity to Ps. 89:51, 52, functional similarity to  $\text{גַּם כִּי/כִּי גַּם}$ , and lexical precedent in Isa. 10:22, Jer. 51:14, Amos 5:22, and Lam. 3:32. The arguments have their various strengths, and we will look at each briefly.

Formally, Lamentations 5 ends with a plea to Yahweh asking him to return his people (5:21). This functions as an *inclusio* to the entire communal lament of chapter five as there is parallelism of the imperative followed by the vocative in vv. 1 and 21: (v. 1)  $\text{זָכֹר יְהוָה}$ // (v. 21)  $\text{יְהוָה יְהוָה}$ . The entire chapter is a plea from beginning to end. The people look over the entire scope of Lamentations and the destruction wrought upon Jerusalem and beg God to remember and cause his people to return. If it is true that the plea's function as an *inclusio*, then it makes sense to understand  $\text{כִּי אֵם}$  as introducing a subordinate clause to the end of the *inclusio*. Robert Gordis finds the form of Ps. 89:51, 52 [MT] provide good syntactical proof for a main clause preceding a subordinate clause describing attendant circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

Remember, O Lord, how your servants are mocked,  
and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations,  
with which your enemies mock, O Lord,  
with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed. (Ps. 89:52, 53 ESV)

The main clause expresses the plea for Yahweh to remember, and the subordinate clause with the relative pronoun,  $\text{אֲשֶׁר}$ , explains the circumstances. Because of the the nature of Lam. 5, there is good reason to think, as stated above that this is what is happening: a plea, closing the chapter, with a subordinate clause explaining the attendant circumstances.

Many do not see the correlation. Westermann goes so far as to say that this construction “suggested by Gordis—main clause consisting of a petition directed to God, subordinate clause stating attendant circumstances, ‘even though’ as the connective—is without parallel in the

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<sup>21</sup> Gordis, “Conclusion,” 291.



psalms of lamentation and is questionable on stylistic grounds.”<sup>22</sup> Is this a fair critique? It seems to me that placing such strictures upon the *form* of the biblical text does not do justice to the breadth of expression. This is not a grammatical critique as was asserted above with the restrictive sense of כִּי אֵם; rather this is simply a syntactical observation. While there are not exact replications of this, there are similar constructions. Ps. 74:20 serves as a perfect example:

הִבֵּט לְבָרִית כִּי מְלֵאוּ מִחֲשָׁכֵי-אָרֶץ נְאוֹת חָמָס

“Show regard for the covenant, for the dark places of earth are filled with pastures of violence.”

Like Ps. 89:51, 52 [MT], we have a plea, followed by a particle [כִּי] as a connective to a subordinate clause stating attendant circumstances. The exact qualifications for Westermann are not met, but neither are we so devoted to the principles of form criticism like Westermann.

Gordis’ next point is a more hypothetical and so we will only cover his basic argument without dealing much with the issues at hand. *In nuce*, Gordis argues functional parallelism between כִּי אֵם and כִּי גַם. He writes,

“The meaning ‘although, even though’ which we have postulated for the double conjunction may be the result of a transposition, *kî 'im* = *'im kî*. We may cite as an analogy the use of *kî gam* which has the meaning ‘although’ in Eccl 4:14; 8:12, 16. This usage, characteristic of Qoheleth, is equivalent to *gam kî* ‘even if, although’ (Isa 1:15; Hos 1:6; 8:10; 9:16; Ps 23:4), and likewise introduces a subordinate clause.”<sup>23</sup>

While the parallels are interesting, and there does seem evidence for transposition, the argument seems more hypothetical. What this does is mainly point us towards the plasticity of the particles and the presence of textual precedents which we will move to next.

There are several examples in the OT of כִּי אֵם operating with the concessive force in a subordinate clause. Gordis gives four examples which we will look at, Isa. 10:22, Amos 5:22,

<sup>22</sup> Westermann, *Lamentations*, 218.

<sup>23</sup> Gordis, “Conclusion,” 292.

and Lam. 3:32.<sup>24</sup>

Isa. 10:22, כִּי אִם-יִהְיֶה עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחֹל הַיָּם שָׂאָר יָשׁוּב בּוֹ, “For though your people, Israel, will be like the sand of the sea, a remnant will return with [Jacob].”

Amos 5:22, כִּי אִם-תַּעֲלוּ-לִי עֲלוֹת וּמִנְחֹתֵיכֶם לֹא אֶרְצֶה, “Even though you should sacrifice your burnt offerings to me and your grain offering, I will not be pleased.”

Lam. 3:32, כִּי אִם-הוֹגָה וְרַחֵם כְּרַב חֶסֶד, “Even though he has afflicted, he will forgive according to the abundance of his covenant faithfulness.”<sup>25</sup>

There is strong precedence for reading *כי אם* concessively in a subordinate clause. While this may also be tied to the oath formula (cf. Jer. 51:14), there is also evidence, as Gordis suggests, that *כי אם* may introduce a subordinate clause as, “even though/although.”

Two final critiques stand against Gordis’ translation. One is more difficult to deal with than the other. We will first review the simpler one. As a reminder, Gordis translates the perfect verbs in Lam. 5:22 as pluperfects: “even though you had despised us greatly and were very angry with us.” Grammatically this is fine; there is not *pluperfect* tense in the Hebrew language and so actions completed in the past must be rendered in the perfect (Williams, §163). But is the pluperfect the proper translation? Westermann argues that Gordis’ translation stands on the pluperfect. For Westermann the pluperfect is inconceivable in the context: “it is precisely taking the verbs as pluperfects that is objectionable. From the standpoint of those engaging in the lament, the display of Yahweh’s wrath is hardly something in the past; it is still working itself

<sup>24</sup> Gordis also references Jer. 51:14. We leave this one out because of the difficulty and disagreement over how to translate this verse. Jer. 51:14, כִּי אִם-מִלְאֲתֶיךָ אָדָם כְּלֹק וְעָנִי עֲלֶיךָ הַיָּדָד, “Even though I fill you with men like locust, yet they will sing a war cry over you.” With whom is Yahweh filling Israel? Should the verse be understood as “Even though I fill you with men like locust, i.e., increase your population...” or “Surely I will fill you with men like locust, viz. the assailants...”? See *BDB* 475.

<sup>25</sup> See also *BDB*, 754.

out in their midst.”<sup>26</sup> Gordis no doubt translates the verbs into the pluperfect because of their placement next to the plea. The rejection happened in the past, was completed in the past, and so the community is now pleading to Yahweh.<sup>27</sup> Westermann’s critique cuts through this. There is no doubt that the community pleads not when they are out of distress but in the midst of it.<sup>28</sup>

Does the translation of Gordis require the pluperfect? Westermann believes so. But this is not necessarily the case. Robin Perry makes the case that “5:21-22 ask for God to restore Israel, even though their current situation remains one of deep and utter rejection.”<sup>29</sup> It seems, then, the best translation in front of us is Perry’s modification of Gordis’: “Even though, you have despised us greatly, and have been exceedingly angry with us.”

### Literary Unity

Grammatically and syntactically, we have argued that the best translation is that of Robert Gordis and Robin Perry. If כִּי אַם is read concessively, introducing a subordinate clause dealing with the circumstances surrounding the main clause, the grammatical questions are assuaged to some degree. Grammar and syntax is only part of translation; the literary work as a whole must come to bear on the translation of the conclusion. Does our understanding of כִּי אַם impose an unnatural happy ending onto the book of Lamentations as some have protested?<sup>30</sup> And, another question, how does the book as whole present the action of God against Zion leading up the communal lament and plea in Lam. 5?

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<sup>26</sup> Westermann, *Lamentations*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Driver, *Treatise on the Use of Tenses*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Perry, *Lamentations*, 157.

<sup>30</sup> Perry, *Lamentations*, 157.

The underlying assumption from which the rest of this brief survey will operate is that the book of Lamentations is a literary unity. This is not standard across the board and is actually controversial in some circles. Arguments for a loose collection of poems is unconvincing, and the evidence for a late redactor is scarce at best.<sup>31</sup> Renkema seems to compromise the two positions and argues for a school of “temple poets.”<sup>32</sup> The best option is to simply take the book as it is, a unified book that builds upon itself, both in its literary structure and its theological message.<sup>33</sup>

If the book is unified then we can expect a consistent message going from 1:1 to 5:22, especially as we consider the divine author. The story that we see is not just one of the possibility of rejection, as seems to be suggested by the restrictive reading if כִּי אָסַף, but of actual rejection. Yahweh has not just punished his people but he has brought judgment upon them to the fullest extent. In effect, he has set aside his covenant with his people and laid waste their temples and their sanctuaries, their towns and their people. The contempt of Yahweh results in utter desolation. Throughout the book, this is the theme: Yahweh has rejected his people because of their sin.

Desolation, though, must be read next to the promise of redemption. The grace of Yahweh provides a lens to interpret his wrath. Lam. 3 serves as this lens for the rest of the book. Chs. 1-2 build up to it find new meaning retrospectively, and chs. 4-5 work work down from, limping but looking towards the future. The punishment of Yahweh is not forever, but it is real.

What is fascinating is just how prominent of a theme rejection and abandonment is in chs.

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<sup>31</sup> For a review of the discussion of the authorship of Lamentations, see Westermann, *Lamentations*, 56-58; Renkema, *Lamentations*, 51-53.

<sup>32</sup> Renkema, *ibid*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> See William H. Shea, "The qinah structure of the book of Lamentations," *Biblica* 60, no. 1 (1979): 103-107 for an analysis of the meter and structure of the Book of Lamentations. Shea concludes that the book is unified and, despite past readings that separated Lam. 5 from the the rest of the book, the concluding chapter is of a piece with the prior four chapters.

1-2 in comparison to chs. 3-5. Lam. 1:5b, כִּי־יְהוָה הוֹגֵה, “For Yahweh has *afflicted* her;” 1:15, סָלָה, כָּל־אֲבִירַי, “[Yahweh] has *rejected* all her mighty men;” 2:5, הָיָה אֲדֹנָי כְּאֹיֵב, “The Lord has become like an enemy;” 2:7, וַזָּנָה אֲדֹנָי מִזְבְּחָיו נָאֵר מִקִּדְשָׁיו, “The Lord has rejected his altars and repudiated his sanctuaries;” 2:20, רְאֵה יְהוָה וְהִבִּיטָה לְמִי עוֹלֵלָתְךָ כֹּה, “Look, Yahweh, and give regard! To whom have you brought this upon.” The references to Yahweh’s rejection are many and drastic in their nature. Not only is Yahweh no longer in the midst of Jerusalem, but he has become כְּאֹיֵב.

Lam. 3 brings a decisive turn in the way the author discusses affliction.<sup>34</sup> Vv. 1-18 describe Yahweh’s judgment in great detail, climaxing with a lugubrious statement of absolute rejection: וְאָמַר אֲבָד נִצָּחִי וְתוֹחֲלֹתַי מִיְהוָה, “And I say, ‘My strength has perished as has my hope away from Yahweh.’” Nevertheless, three verse later in 3:22, the author expresses what his hope is in: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end” (ESV). Lam.

3:31, 32 only secure this reality; the rejection of the past two chapters will not last forever:

כִּי לֹא יִזְנַח לְעוֹלָם אֲדֹנָי  
כִּי אִם־הוֹגֵה וְרַחֵם כְּרַב חֶסֶדֹו

“For the Lord will not reject forever;  
even though he has afflicted,  
yet he will have compassion because of his covenant faithfulness.”

The turn of the author is stunning. Despite the miserable conditions of the previous verses, something else remains alive in the heart and mind of the author. Lam. 4 contains one reference to the destruction of the people: “The Lord gave full vent to his wrath he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations” (4:11, ESV).

<sup>34</sup> Bo Johnson, “Form and Message in Lamentations,” *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97, no. 1 (1985): 58-73, 72.

By the time the author has come to Lam. 5:20, rejection, affliction, and abandonment by God form the basis of the author's plea. Nothing remains; nothing other than the steadfast love of the Lord. He has rejected them! He has done away with them and become their enemy, even forgotten them and forsaken them (5:20). The options that stand before the people are not rejection or return, but continued rejection or return.

Norman Gottwald describes the theology of Lamentations as a contrast of two different theologies: a theology of doom and a theology of hope.<sup>35</sup> The first two chapters dwell heavily on the doom of the city of Zion, but the book does not resign itself to desolation. By the end of Lamentations, a theology of hope breaks through: "The motif of tragic reversal is presupposed in the closing verses, where there is a fervent prayer that the tragic present may give way to a glorious future not unlike the remembered past."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the ending of Lamentations, the last line, does not look forward to possible rejection—"unless you have utterly rejected us"—but looks backward to the rejection that has happened and the hope of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness—"Cause us to return...even though you have despised us greatly."

## Conclusion

This paper looked at a very particular issue in the book of Lamentations: how should the particle  $\text{כִּי אִם}$  of Lam. 5:22 be translated? Despite the plurality of options before us, two were the most likely: a *restrictive* reading of  $\text{כִּי אִם}$ , limiting the preceding main clause, or a *concessive* reading of  $\text{כִּי אִם}$ , describing the attendant circumstances of the main clause, popularized by Robert Gordis. The lexical meaning and the finer points of grammatical and syntactical analysis aided our examination and pointed towards the concessive, "even though." In light of this, we moved

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<sup>35</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, SBT 14 (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, 1954).

<sup>36</sup> Gottwald, *ibid*, 60.

through Lamentations to determine what themes guided the book leading up to the plea of 5:22. Rejection, desolation, and abandonment dominated the text, but they were not alone. The center of the book, Lam. 3, gave covenantal assurance to a hopeful ending, though not a happy one. Thus, it is our conclusion that Lamentations 5:21-22 must be rendered as a look in the past with a plea towards the future. Yahweh afflicts his people, and it may seem like he has rejected them, but there is hope because he will not forget his people. He does not reject forever, for the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Bring us back to yourself, O Lord, that we may repent,  
renew our days as they were of old,  
even though you have greatly despised us,  
and are exceedingly angry with us.

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