

Notes on Lamentations

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Introduction

TITLE AND POSITION

The English title of this book comes from the Talmud,¹ which called it "Lamentations" (Heb. *qinoth*). The Hebrew Bible has the title "Ah, how" or "Alas" or "How" (Heb. *'ekah*), the first word in the first, second, and fourth chapters. The title in the Septuagint is "Wailings" (Gr. *Threnoi*).

The position of Lamentations after Jeremiah in the English Bible follows the tradition of the Septuagint and Vulgate versions. They placed it there because of its connection with the destruction of Jerusalem, which Jeremiah recorded, and the Jewish tradition that Jeremiah wrote both books.

In the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations occurs between Ruth and Ecclesiastes as the third book of the "Megilloth" or "Scrolls," within the third and last major division of the Old Testament, namely: the "Hagiographa" or "Writings." The Megilloth consists of The Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. The Jews read each of these books on a special feast or fast day each year: Passover, Pentecost, the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem, Tabernacles, and Purim respectively. The Megilloth followed three books of poetry (Job, Proverbs, and Psalms) and preceded three other books (Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles) in the Hagiographa.

WRITER AND DATE

This book does not identify its writer. The common view that Jeremiah wrote it rests on a preface in the Greek Septuagint, which the Latin Vulgate

¹ *Baba Bathra* 15a.

adopted and elaborated on. The Septuagint version of Lamentations begins, "And it came to pass after Israel had been taken away into captivity and Jerusalem had been laid waste that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem and said." The Vulgate added, "with a bitter spirit sighing and wailing."

The translators of these ancient versions may have deduced Jeremiah's authorship of Lamentations from 2 Chronicles 35:25: "Then Jeremiah chanted a lament for Josiah. And all the male and female singers speak about Josiah in their lamentations to this day. And they made them an ordinance in Israel; behold, they are also written in the Lamentations." The Book of Lamentations does not record a lament for Josiah, but this reference in Chronicles connects Jeremiah with written lamentations. Some scholars believed that the Septuagint and Vulgate translators erroneously deduced from this verse in Chronicles that Jeremiah wrote Lamentations.¹

Moderate scholars, both conservative and liberal, who reject the Septuagint tradition, divide fairly equally over the question of Jeremiah's authorship of the book. Those who favor him as the writer do so because of the theological similarities between this book and the Book of Jeremiah, the stylistic similarities with other writings of the same period, and for sentimental reasons.²

I think probably Jeremiah wrote these lamentations, in view of the similarities in style and subject matter between the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations (cf. Lam. 1:2 with Jer. 30:14; Lam. 1:16; 2:11 with Jer. 9:1, 18; Lam. 2:20; 4:10 with Jer. 19:9; and Lam. 4:21 with Jer. 49:12).³ Also, an eyewitness of Jerusalem's destruction must have written both books.⁴

"Although probably written by Jeremiah, the book is very likely intentionally anonymous in order to allow anyone to identify

¹E.g., E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 342; and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 1069.

²See Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering*, p. 18, for a chart comparing 10 subjects in Lamentations with similar ones in 2 Kings 25 and in Jeremiah; and p. 29, for a chart showing identical terminology in Lamentations and Jeremiah.

³For additional similarities, see Ross Price, "Lamentations," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 696; and Young, p. 363.

⁴See Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 365-67; and Kaiser, pp. 24-30, for refutations of arguments against Jeremiah's authorship.

with the grief of the 'I am the man who has seen affliction' (3:1)."¹

Almost all Lamentations scholars believe the date of composition fell between 586 and 538 B.C., namely: during the Babylonian Captivity.² Most believe that they were written before 561 B.C., when Evilmerodach, King of Babylon, released Jehoiachin from prison (2 Kings 25:27-30; Jer. 31-34). The basis for this view is the absence of national hope in the book. The hope expressed in chapter 3 is personal rather than national.

We do not know when Jeremiah died, but if he was born about 643 B.C., as seems probable, the earlier years of the Captivity seem to be a more likely time of composition. The vivid accounts of Jerusalem's destruction also argue for a time of composition not far removed from 586 B.C., probably only a few months or years later.

Some scholars have suggested that the chronological order of the five laments that make up the five chapters is 2, 4, 5, and 1, with 3 unknown.³ It is now impossible to discover in what order the writer composed each of the five laments. Their order in the canonical text may not necessarily reflect the order in which the writer wrote them.

The condition of the Hebrew text of Lamentations is very good. That is, there are not many discrepancies between the ancient copies of the book that we have.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Assuming that Jeremiah wrote the book, he probably did so in Judah following the destruction of Jerusalem, or in Egypt shortly thereafter, or both.

"The destruction of Jerusalem is the event in which the long narrative from Genesis through Kings culminates, about which

¹Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 162.

²Iaia Provan, *Lamentations*, pp. 7-20, chose to remain agnostic as to the book's authorship, date, place of writing, and originally intended use (public or private).

³E.g., H. L. Ellison, "Lamentations," in *Isaiah-Ezekiel*, vol. 6 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 696.

the prophets warned, and which leaves its mark on all subsequent literature of the Bible."¹

PURPOSE

Since the Jews read Lamentations on the annual fast that celebrated Jerusalem's destruction as far back as tradition reaches (cf. Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19), it may be that the writer wrote this book to be read then. Its purpose then would have been to memorialize God's faithfulness in bringing covenant punishment on His people for their unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant.² The book would then have taught later generations the importance of covenant faithfulness and God's faithfulness.

"The author of the Book of Lamentations was attempting to show the fulfillment of the curses presented in Deuteronomy 28."³

"It [Lamentations] is a mute reminder that sin, in spite of all its allurements and excitement, carries with it heavy weights of sorrow, grief, misery, barrenness, and pain. It is the other side of the 'eat, drink, and be merry' coin."⁴

"This is one of the most tragic books in the Bible."⁵

STRUCTURE AND GENRE

"Lamentations is one of the most highly crafted of all biblical books, the Hebrew poetry developed in a complex acrostic pattern. It seems as though the very crafting of the poem was

¹Adele Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 1.

²See *ibid.*

³John A. Martin, "The Contribution of the Book of Lamentations to Salvation History" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975), p. 44. See *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1209, for a chart of the many parallels between Lamentations and Deuteronomy.

⁴Charles R. Swindoll, *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*, "Introduction."

⁵Young, p. 365.

an outworking of his [Jeremiah's] grief, as a grieving mother might fashion a collage of pictures of her deceased child."¹

The book consists of five communal (or corporate) laments (funeral or mourning songs, elegies).² All but the third of these describe the Babylonians' destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and its aftermath. Each chapter exhibits its own special qualities of form and content, and each of the five laments looks at the destruction of Jerusalem from a different point of view.³ Yet the basic structure of the book is chiasmic.

- A The misery of Jerusalem's citizens ch. 1
- B God's punishment of Jerusalem ch. 2
- C Jeremiah's personal reactions ch. 3
- B' God's severity toward Jerusalem ch. 4
- A' The response of the godly ch. 5

It is probable that the book is a collection of originally separate poems, brought together because of their common theme of suffering and mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem.⁴ The first lament pictures Jerusalem in its desolate condition following Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the city. Chapter 2 clarifies the cause of the desolation and resulting captivity. Chapter 3 stresses the purpose of Judah's plight. Chapter 4 focuses on Jerusalem's past and present conditions. And chapter 5 is a prayer appealing to Yahweh for mercy.⁵

"One of the commonest ways to deal with another's suffering is to make light of it, to gloss it over, to attempt shortcuts through it. Because it is so painful, we try to get to the other side quickly. Lamentations provides a structure to guarantee against that happening. A regular Talmudic idiom speaks of keeping the Torah from *aleph* to *tau* or, as we would say, from A to Z. Lamentations puts the idiom to work by being attentive

¹Ronald B. Allen, *A Shelter in the Fury*, p. 72.

²See Robin A. Parry, *Lamentations*, pp. 206-28, for comments on the place of lament in Christian spirituality.

³See C. F. Keil, "The Lamentations of Jeremiah," in *The Prophecies of Jeremiah*, 2:336.

⁴Berlin, pp. 6, 7, 15.

⁵See also *ibid.*, p. 7.

to suffering. It is important to pay attention to everything that God says; but it is also important to pay attention to everything that men and women feel, especially when that feeling is as full of pain and puzzlement as suffering.

"The acrostic is a structure for taking suffering seriously ... [Lamentations] repeats the acrostic form. It goes over the story again and again and again and again and again—five times."¹

"Evil is not inexhaustible. It is not infinite. It is not worthy of a lifetime of attention. Timing is important. If a terminus is proposed too soon, people know that their suffering has not been taken seriously and conclude that it is therefore without significance. But if it goes on too long ... [it can become] a crippling adjustment to life which frustrates wholeness. 'To some, ill health is a way to be important.'"²

The whole book is poetry. Chapters 1—4 are in the common meter in which most laments appear in the Hebrew Bible: the so-called *qinah* meter, with a few verses being exceptions. In the *qinah* meter, the second line is one beat shorter than the first line, giving an incomplete or limping impression to the reader of the Hebrew text. Chapter 5 has the same number of beats in each line and is more like a prayer poem (cf. Pss. 44; 80).

Robin Parry highlighted six specific features of the poetry of Lamentations: (1) the *qinah* meter, (2) enjambment (the meaning and syntax run over the end of the first line into the second), (3) genre (a mixture of dirge and communal lament), (4) voices (at least three speakers and perhaps as many as nine), (5) stereotypical language and grief, and (6) the acrostic patterns.³

The first four chapters are acrostic poems. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 each contain 22 verses, and each verse begins with the succeeding consonant of the Hebrew alphabet. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, however, the Hebrew letter *pe* comes before the Hebrew letter *'ayin*, contrary to the usual order.

¹Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, p. 96.

²*Ibid.*, p. 101.

³Parry, pp. 9-15.

Deviations of this sort also exist in other acrostic poems (cf. Ps. 25; 36; 37; 145).

"Several Hebrew abecedaries (alphabets scratched on pieces of broken pottery by Hebrew children learning to write) have been found by archeologists. Some of these alphabetical lists are in the normal order for the Hebrew letters but others are in the reverse *pe-'ayin* order. Evidently both arrangements of the alphabet were acceptable. Thus the writer of Lamentations was merely employing two forms of the Hebrew alphabet, both of which were used in his time."¹

Chapter 3 contains 66 verses. In this chapter, the first three verses begin with the first consonant of the Hebrew alphabet, the second three with the second consonant, and so on. In Psalm 119, there are 176 verses with 22 sections of eight verses, each section beginning with the succeeding consonant of the Hebrew alphabet, and each verse in that section beginning with the same consonant. The acrostic form may have helped the Jews remember these laments, but it definitely expressed the completeness of their sorrow, controlled their emotions, provided variety of expression, and demonstrated the writer's virtuosity.

Chapter 5 also contains 22 verses, but it is not an acrostic poem, though it simulates the shape and form of an acrostic. Perhaps the writer could not express all that he wanted to say in this chapter with an acrostic. The writers evidently followed the alphabetical order only if they could fit their thoughts into that order. Content took precedence over an artificial arrangement.²

"Dirge poetry of the kind exemplified by Lamentations was by no means uncommon in Near Eastern antiquity. The Sumerians were the first to write sombre [*sic*] works commemorating the fall of some of their great cities to enemy invaders, one of the most celebrated being the lament over the destruction of Ur. The author of Lamentations stood therefore in a long and

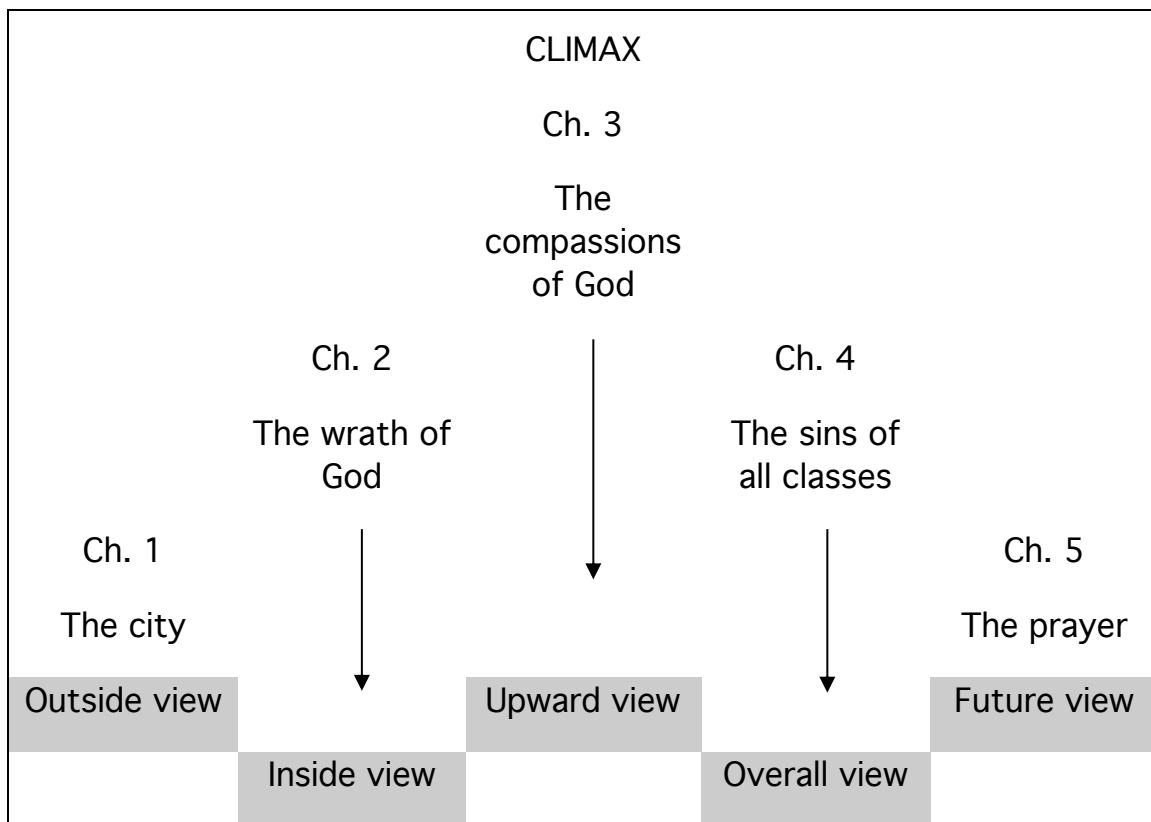
¹Charles H. Dyer, "Lamentations," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, pp. 1210-11. See also Kaiser, p. 37.

²See Keil, 2:338. For further analysis of the structure of these chapters, see Harrison, pp. 10:65-67; and Homer Heater Jr., "Structure and Meaning in Lamentations," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:595 (July-September 1992):304-15.

respected literary tradition when he bewailed the destruction of Jerusalem and the desolation of Judah in 587 B.C."¹

Dirges lamenting national tragedies have obvious connections with dirges lamenting personal tragedies (cf. 2 Sam. 1:17-27; 3:33-34; 2 Chron. 35:25; Jer. 7:29; 9:10, 17-21; Ezek. 19; 26:17; 27:2; Amos 5:1-2). This connection is also evident in the communal and individual lament psalms. These laments became a part of Israel's sacred writings the same way many of the Psalms did.

Walter Kaiser Jr. diagrammed the literary structure of Lamentations as follows:²



W. F. Lanahan identified five personae that speak in the book: (1) the city of Jerusalem (as a woman; 1:9c, 11c-22; 2:20-22), (2) an objective reporter (1:1-11b [excepting 9c], 15, 17; 2:1-19), (3) a first person male sufferer ("soldier"; ch. 3), (4) the bourgeois (ch. 4), and (5) the choral

¹R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 195.

²Kaiser, p. 24.

voices of Jerusalem (ch. 5).¹ Provan saw only three: (1) the narrator, (2) Zion, and (3) the people of Zion.²

THEOLOGY

Whereas the Book of Jeremiah contains many *warnings* about the judgment that *would* come, the Book of Lamentations contains much *mourning* over the judgment that *had* come. The fall of Jerusalem is the focus of both books.

There are two poetical books in the Old Testament that deal primarily with the problem of suffering. Job treats the problem of *personal* suffering, and Lamentations deals with the problem of *national* suffering. Habakkuk also deals with the problem of national suffering, but it is two-thirds prose (chs. 1—2) and one-third poetry (ch. 3).

These three books present the problem of God's justice and His love, or divine sovereignty and human responsibility, though they fall short of solving it. Indeed, this antinomy is insoluble this side of heaven (cf. Mark 15:34). (An "antinomy" is two apparently correct and reasonable statements or facts that do not agree and therefore produce a contradictory and illogical conclusion.) These books also present sovereign Yahweh rather than man as the central figure in human history.

"Nothing contrasts [the believing] and the humanist traditions more clearly than their respective responses to suffering. The modern humanist traditions see suffering as a deficiency—usually under the analogy of sickness... Suffering, as such, has no value and no meaning—it is only a sign that things have gone wrong."³

"Lamentations never asks, 'Why has this happened to us?' This is because the 'why' is already known—Israel has broken the covenant law. Rather, the anguished questions behind

¹W. F. Lanahan, "The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974):41-49.

²Provan, p. 7.

³Peterson, p. 111.

Lamentations are, 'Why punish *so severely?*' and '*How long* until you save?'"¹

The writer viewed the devastation of Jerusalem and the punishment of the Judahites as divine judgment, not primarily the result of the Babylonian invader from the north. This added a depth to the tragedy that it would not have had if viewed as simply a loss in war. He also stressed the *suffering* of the Israelites, rather than their sin.

"It [the book] is a reminder that sin carries with it the consequences of sorrow, grief, misery, and pain."²

Walter Kaiser summarized what he considered to be the eight kinds of suffering in the Old Testament:

- *Retributive* suffering involves people receiving punishment for their wicked behavior (cf. Deut. 30:19). This is the kind of suffering that Jeremiah described the people of Jerusalem and Judah undergoing in Lamentations. It is also the kind of suffering that Job's three friends incorrectly concluded that he was experiencing.
- *Educational* or *disciplinary* suffering is what God allows to touch people in order to teach them various lessons (cf. Prov. 3:11; Jer. 8:18-21; 15:15; Heb. 12:7). Job's friend Elihu erroneously believed that Job was suffering primarily because God wanted to teach Job something (Job 32—37).
- *Vicarious* suffering is suffering that people experience on the behalf of others (Lev. 16; Isa. 53:5). The Old Testament sacrificial system, for example, involved this kind of suffering.
- *Empathetic* suffering is suffering that someone experiences when he or she enters into the suffering of someone else (cf. Gen. 6:5-6; Exod. 32:14; Judg. 2:15; 1 Sam. 15:11; Isa. 63:9; Hos. 11:8; Rom. 12:15; 2 Cor. 2:4).
- *Doxological* suffering occurs when God purposes to glorify Himself through the suffering of someone (cf. Gen. 45:4, 5, 7; 50:20; John 9:3).
- *Evidential* or *testimonial* suffering is suffering for the purpose of bearing testimony to something (Job 1—2; Ps. 73:23-24; Hab. 1:13; 2:4; 3:16, 18).

¹Parry, p. 29.

²Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 645.

- *Revelational* suffering is suffering designed to bring someone into a deeper understanding and closer relationship with God (e.g., Hosea; Jeremiah).
- And *eschatological* or *apocalyptic* suffering is the unique suffering that will be the portion of earth-dwellers shortly before the Lord returns to the earth (Isa. 24—27; Jer. 30—33; Ezek. 33—48; Dan. 2—12; Zech. 12—14).¹

The lack of hope in these laments is due in part to the writer's view of the tragedy as divine punishment. The destruction had been so great that the people could not see, or had perhaps forgotten, God's promises of a future beyond the conquest. Similarly, Jesus' disciples did not remember the promises of His resurrection because the tragedy of His death so overwhelmed them initially.

Nevertheless, the laments are full of prayer (1:20-22; 2:20-22; 3:55-66), especially the lament in chapter 5, which is entirely prayer. The writer cried out to God, again like Job, in view of the present tragedy. His prayers sound a note of hope in a situation that would otherwise have been completely devoid of hope.

"His prayers provide the faithful of all ages with a model of how God's people should approach the Lord after they have experienced His discipline."²

There are no messianic predictions in Lamentations as such. Nevertheless, what is true of Yahweh is, of course, true of Jesus Christ. Thus, much of the theology of the book is applicable to Christ, if not directly revelatory of Him (cf. 3:22; Jude 21).³ Many expositors have seen foreshadows of Christ's passion in some of the dark sayings of Lamentations.

"... the theological message of Lamentations is not purely negative. There is also hope, but it is of minimal significance in the book. In the heart of the book (3:22-33) the poet

¹Kaiser, pp. 121-30.

²Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of Jeremiah and Lamentations," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 359.

³See Parry, pp. 181-90, for many parallels.

expresses his assurance that God does not abandon those who turn to him for help."¹

"Protestant Christians, one regrets to say, have too often neglected the reading of these solemn poems. Yet in these days of personal, national, and international crises (and disaster) the message of this book is a challenge to repent of sins personal, national, and international, and to commit ourselves afresh to God's steadfast love. Though this love is ever present and outgoing, a holy and just God must surely judge unrepentant sinners."²

Paul House identified the centering themes in the theology of Lamentations as: (1) God and the people of God, (2) God and Jerusalem, (3) God and the nations, and (4) God and prayer.³ Another major theme is suffering (on a national scale).⁴ Adele Berlin identified sin, punishment, repentance, faith, and hope as important concepts in Lamentations.⁵

OUTLINE

- I. The destruction and misery of Jerusalem (the first lament) ch. 1
 - A. An observer's sorrow over Jerusalem's condition 1:1-11
 1. The extent of the devastation 1:1-7
 2. The cause of the desolation 1:8-11
 - B. Jerusalem's sorrow over her own condition 1:12-22
 1. Jerusalem's call to onlookers 1:12-19
 2. Jerusalem's call to the Lord 1:20-22
- II. The divine punishment of Jerusalem (the second lament) ch. 2
 - A. God's anger 2:1-10

¹Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 353.

²Price, p. 696.

³Paul R. House, "Lamentations," in *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, p. 323.

⁴Provan, pp. 20-25.

⁵Berlin, p. 17.

- B. Jeremiah's grief 2:11-19
 - C. Jerusalem's plea 2:20-22
- III. The prophet's response to divine judgment (the third lament) ch. 3
- A. Jeremiah's sorrows 3:1-18
 - B. Jeremiah's hope 3:19-39
 - C. Jeremiah's prayer 3:40-66
 - 1. A recollection of past sins 3:40-47
 - 2. A recollection of past deliverance 3:48-66
- IV. The anger of Yahweh (the fourth lament) ch. 4
- A. Conditions during the siege 4:1-11
 - 1. The first description of siege conditions 4:1-6
 - 2. The second description of siege conditions 4:7-10
 - B. Causes of the siege 4:11-20
 - C. Hope following the siege 4:21-22
- V. The response of the godly (the fifth lament) ch. 5
- A. A plea to Yahweh for remembrance 5:1-18
 - B. A plea to Yahweh for restoration 5:19-22

MESSAGE

The church in the early years of the twenty-first century is very similar to Judah at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. Our times are very similar to Jeremiah's times. We minister in a cultural context that is remarkably like Jeremiah's. Lamentations helps us see the parallels between our culture and Jeremiah's. Francis A. Schaeffer has pointed out many similarities in *Death in the City*.

First, people had abandoned God. It was not that they ceased to believe that He existed, but they felt He was irrelevant to their lives. This was true of the pagans generally, but it was also true of God's people. Normally in any particular culture, what marks unbelievers also marks believers. Temple worship had become formal and unsatisfying. The religious leaders were

catering to the people's desires, rather than confronting them with their disobedience. Jeremiah was one of only a few exceptions to this trend in his day.

Second, the people had departed from God's Word. When people believe that God is irrelevant, they quickly stop paying attention to what He says. Jeremiah's contemporaries had neglected the promises of covenant blessing for obedience, and punishment for disobedience. Most of the people had stopped reading and studying the Mosaic Law. This opened the door to ignorance of God's will and consequent disobedience and punishment.

Third, the people transferred their trust from God to inadequate objects of hope, namely: their political allies, and the temple. Rather than turning to Yahweh for provisions and protection, they chose to rely on what they could see, and what appeared to be strong. Egypt and Babylon appealed to them especially, but these allies proved to be unreliable and even treacherous.

The people also regarded the temple as a *fetish*. They believed that since God had blessed the temple by inhabiting it, and He had promised to remain faithful to them, nothing could happen to the temple. This conclusion was the result of selective listening to God's Word. They believed only what they wanted to believe, not all that God had said about how He would deal with them. Selective listening to the Word of God is still a temptation.

So, Lamentations teaches us that when God's people abandon Him and depart from His Word, tragedy follows inevitably. This is one of the most tragic books in the Bible. It pictures the results of apostasy: departure from God.

"High calling, flaunted by low living, inevitably issues in deep suffering."¹

Lamentations is quite similar to the Book of Job. Both Lamentations and Job deal with the problem of suffering. Job deals with this problem on the *personal* level. Job suffered greatly as an individual, and the book that bears his name describes his suffering. Lamentations deals with the problem of suffering on the *national* level. In it we see God's people suffering greatly. This book describes in painful detail the suffering of the nation of Judah

¹J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 3:286.

and the people of Jerusalem. There are many statements in Lamentations that recall what Job wrote about his sufferings.

"Oftentimes the believer has not been aided or prepared by solid exposition of Scripture or a theology of suffering to cope with the suffering as it comes in national disaster, death, depression, separation, rejection, or the like. Too frequently the only place many turn in such circumstances is to medically trained clinicians. This is not to say that a referral to the medical profession is not altogether appropriate at times; but we do maintain that 'grief management,' as the phrase goes these days, is the business of the gospel as well."¹

The suffering of God's people is a problem because it pits the love of God against His justice. On the one hand, God loves people and has promised to do what is best to bring about their blessing. But on the other hand, God punishes people for their sins, and this does not seem to be loving. This is the same problem that children have who grow up in homes where their parents tell them they love them—and yet punish them.

Careful attention to the Word of God solves this problem, in most cases, because God has explained why He punishes those whom He loves. Yet at other times, as in the case of Job, there does not appear to be adequate reason for the judgment. In Jeremiah's day, the people did not understand the reason for their suffering. They only saw the punishment. They had forgotten the reasons for it given in the Mosaic Covenant. This problem was what concerned Habakkuk as well.

But this problem of suffering has an even deeper dimension. It eventually boils down to the antinomy between God's sovereignty and human freedom. If God is sovereign, are human beings genuinely free moral agents? Is not God, rather than man, really responsible for sin? Almost all students of the Scriptures have concluded that the resolution of the biblical teaching of God's sovereignty and man's freedom lies beyond our present power to comprehend. The best that we can do now is to acknowledge that God is indeed sovereign; He is the ultimate authority in the universe. But at the same time, human beings are genuinely responsible for their choices.

¹Kaiser, p. 40.

The Jews in Jeremiah's day struggled to keep these revelations in balance, as anyone does who experiences extreme and apparently unjustified punishment. They denied either the sovereignty of God or their own responsibility. Job, too, struggled with these issues, but in his personal life.

A great revelation of Lamentations is the covenant faithfulness of God in spite of the covenant unfaithfulness of His people.

God is the central figure in this book, not Jeremiah (who goes unnamed in the book), or the Judahites. This book is a revelation of God, as is every book in the Bible. The aspect of God's character that shines through the book from beginning to end is His sorrow. Sin and apostasy not only result in inevitable discipline for people, but they cause God great pain. He does not enjoy punishing His people for their unfaithfulness.

Behind the heartbreak that Jeremiah articulated, we can sense the heartbreak of God Himself. We can also see foreshadows of Jesus Christ's heartbreak over rebels against God, which come through strongly in the Gospels, where Jesus' heartbreak recalls the sentiments that Jeremiah expressed in Lamentations.

I would say that the key verses in the book are 3:22-23. These verses appear, appropriately, near the structural center of the book. More importantly, they express the positive truth of God's faithfulness against the black backdrop of the Judahites' unfaithfulness. Unless God was faithful to His covenant promises, the siege of Jerusalem would have spelled the end of Israel. This reference to God's faithfulness is one of the few notes of hope in the litany of tragedy that is the Book of Lamentations. Judgment had to come on Judah because of her covenant unfaithfulness, but Yahweh was faithful to His covenant promises and provided compassion every morning.

There are several abiding values of this book that make it useful for us today.

The first is the revelation that Lamentations provides of the heart of God. How does God feel when His people wander away from Him, squander His blessings, and get into trouble? He still loves them and remains committed to blessing them, even though He allows them to reap the whirlwind that they have sown. The great New Testament parallel to this revelation is Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

"... God suffers with those whom He chastises."¹

A second abiding value of this book is the proof that sin eventually and inevitably results in devastation. This is perhaps the most obvious lesson of the book. The terrible consequences of the siege of Jerusalem, which Jeremiah chronicled in all their horrors, were the fruit of unfaithfulness to God. People cannot escape the death that sin brings—even God's people. Romans 6:23 expresses a universal truth: sin always results in death in some form.

The Judahites thought that they could get away with their sins, but even though God was slow to judge them, they finally experienced the devastating consequences of sin. Perhaps one of the reasons we do not hear much preaching on Lamentations today, is that our contemporaries do not want to be reminded of their sin any more than Jeremiah's people did. If there were more preaching on Lamentations, people would have to face up to the fact that sin leads to terrible devastation.

A third value of this book is its example of how to deal with God after He has brought the devastation of His punishment on us because of our sins. Jeremiah modeled this for us. After judgment, people need to turn back to God. We see Jeremiah doing this in his prayers. A prayer concludes each of the first three laments in this book. In each of these chapters, Jeremiah focused first on the terrible judgment of God, but then he appealed to God for mercy and restoration.

Chapter 5, the climax of the book, is entirely prayer (cf. Habakkuk 3). Having painted graphic pictures of the siege of Jerusalem and its consequences, the prophet concluded his book by praying to God. One common reaction to devastating circumstances is to turn away from God. Jeremiah teaches us that, when we find ourselves flat on our faces in the dust, we need to turn back to Him in prayer and repentance (cf. Job).

There is not much hope in Lamentations. The emphasis is on the awful consequences of apostasy: departure from God. But the book ends with a reminder of the eternal sovereignty of Yahweh (5:19). The mini-acrostic structure of verses 19-22 suggests that God's sovereignty is the answer to all the devastation described in the other acrostics in chapters 1—4. Jeremiah's question in verse 20 recalls Jesus' question from Calvary: "My

¹Baxter, 3:285. Italics omitted.

God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" That is not so much a "clueless" question, in both instances, as it is a question that highlights the drastic consequences of sin. It might be more appropriate to place an exclamation point after Jesus' words rather than a question mark.

Verse 21 proceeds to request that God will initiate restoration, the only hope of downtrodden sinners. Verse 22 reminds us that God does not utterly reject His people, even though His anger may burn against them, though this verse does so in an almost hopeless way that finishes off the essentially negative message of the book.

God is angry with the church of our day and with professing Christians of our day, if we have departed from God. And we can count on His judgment, if we do not repent. Today's church may spend too much time on the good news of salvation by grace, and not enough time on the bad news that judgment is coming because of sin. Lamentations helps us to remember why we need salvation. Its message is much needed in our day (cf. Rom. 1:18—3:21: the need for God's righteousness). What does God's judgment of the church look like? Lack of influence, independence, insensitivity, and spiritual blindness are its telltale signs.

Here are some additional values of this book. The theme of Lamentations is the sorrow of God. It reveals how God sorrows over the sins of His people and over the consequences that those sins bring upon them. It shows God grieving over His people, and the destruction of the holy city and its temple. It is a great revelation of the loving heart of God. As we read and study the book, we should also note these lessons.

"No book of the Bible is more of an orphan book than Lamentations; rarely, if ever, have interpreters chosen to use this book for a Bible study, an expository series of messages, or as a Bible conference textual exposition. Our generation's neglect of this volume has meant that our pastoral work, our caring ministry for believers, and our own ability to find direction in the midst of calamity, pain, and suffering have been seriously truncated and rendered partially or totally ineffective."¹

¹Kaiser, p. 10.

Exposition

I. THE DESTRUCTION AND MISERY OF JERUSALEM (THE FIRST LAMENT) CH. 1

This acrostic lament contains a variety of similar statements describing the destruction and the consequent misery of Jerusalem. Thus, the two section titles that follow describe a slight shift in viewpoint, rather than a major division of the chapter into two distinct segments. In the first part (vv. 1-11), the prophet described the desolate city primarily from the viewpoint of an observer. In the second part (vv. 12-22), he personified Jerusalem bewailing her own desolate condition.

"Jeremiah's first dirge established the book's theme—the sorrow of sin."¹

"The terrible nature of her [Jerusalem's] situation is communicated to the reader mainly through pictures drawn from female experience in the ancient world ..."²

"The personification of a city as a woman is a common image in prophetic literature, with possible antecedents in Mesopotamian literature and successors in Greek literature—but nowhere is it developed more effectively than in the personification of Jerusalem in this chapter. Here a kaleidoscope of images turns quickly from a lonely widow, to a degraded princess, to a whore, to a rape victim, to a betrayed lover, to an abandoned wife."³

All the dirges in Lamentations express the grief of the defeated Jerusalemites. But the miserable condition of the city is most prominent in this first one, not so much what she had undergone as what she had become.

¹Dyer, "Lamentations," p. 1211.

²Provan, p. 33.

³Berlin, p. 47.

"Chap. 1 is introductory, for it sets forth the entire book's format, tone, and themes."¹

A. AN OBSERVER'S SORROW OVER JERUSALEM'S CONDITION 1:1-11

Jeremiah first viewed Jerusalem's destruction as an outsider looking in. Verses 1-7 describe the extent of the desolation and verses 8-11 its cause.

1. The extent of the devastation 1:1-7

1:1 Jeremiah, speaking as a narrator, bewailed the abandoned city of Jerusalem that had once been so glorious and independent. This verse actually begins with the word "Alas" (Heb. *'eka*), which is a cry of despair, horror, and lament often associated with funeral dirges (cf. Is. 1:21; Jer. 48:17; Ezek. 26:17).

Sitting alone is sometimes a picture of deep sorrow and mourning (cf. 2:10; Ezra 9:3; Neh. 1:4). Now the city, personified as a woman, was as solitary as a widow and as servile as a forced laborer. It had changed in three ways: numerically, economically, and socially.

"Jerusalem, a city which used to be close to God, has been changed by the choice of significant men. They have turned away from Him when they knew Him, and now their city is under siege. There is death in the city."²

"The narrator is seeking to elicit the pity of the audience right from the start."³

1:2 The prophet personified Jerusalem as a young girl abandoned by her lovers and betrayed by her friends (cf. Jer. 4:30; 30:14). Normally weeping gives way to sleep at night, but when it does not, sorrow is very great indeed.

¹House, p. 364.

²Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, pp. 17-18.

³Parry, p. 43.

"The first of the five Lamentations has one monotonous theme repeated five times: 'There is no one to comfort['] (*'en menahem*—1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21). In this exceptionally vivid depiction of the desolation of Zion, the city of God, this one phrase rings like the heavy gong of a funeral bell."¹

- 1:3 The prophet then expounded on the calamity (vv. 3-6). Judah, the personified daughter of Jerusalem, had gone into exile because of the affliction and servitude that Yahweh had allowed Babylon to impose on her. She was out of the Promised Land, where God had said she would find rest (cf. Deut. 12:10; 25:19; Josh. 21:44; 23:1; 2 Sam. 7:1, 11; 1 Kings 8:56; Ps. 95). Now there was no rest for her, but only distress, as the people lived among the Gentiles.

"The reference to Judah ... is hyperbolic: it means simply that a significant number of Judaeans went into exile. ... Hyperbole is, indeed, a feature of the poem as a whole, a fact which must be borne in mind when the attempt is made to look behind the text to the historical circumstances which might have prompted its composition ... The language is impressionistic rather than scientifically precise."²

- 1:4 "Zion" (possibly from the Heb. *siyon*, meaning "Castle") is a poetic name for Jerusalem. No Judahites came to the feasts in Jerusalem because they were in exile. Consequently the roads mourned that pilgrims did not cover them with joyful song. Zion's gates missed the constant flow of people in and out of the city. The gates were where people congregated to transact business, to carry out legal transactions, and to socialize. The few priests and virgins left there were lonely and miserable.

"The name [Zion] itself is not simply a synonym for Jerusalem. It is a unique term, rather, for

¹Kaiser, p. 43.

²Provan, p. 38.

Jerusalem as the location of the cult, as the temple city, the dwelling place of YHWH."¹

"The city's woes are emphasized more in the book's early poems than in its later ones, when the people's woes, confessions, and petitions take precedence."²

1:5 Jerusalem's enemies had become her masters and had humiliated her, since God had caused them to prevail because of Jerusalem's many sins.

"At this point the author reveals one of the book's most significant theological concepts: what has happened to Judah has occurred because of her sins [cf. Deut. 28:52-63]."³

"Over and over again he [Jeremiah] affirmed that the Lord Himself had decreed (1:17; 2:17; 3:37-38) and sent the calamity (1:5, 12-15; 2:1-8; 3:1, 43-45; 4:11)."⁴

The city was devoid of children since they were in captivity.

1:6 Once majestic, "daughter ... Zion" (God's daughter) now sat humiliated.

But "it is not Zion's daughter who is being addressed (Zion has no daughter) but Zion herself, who is classified as a 'daughter.'"⁵

Zion's leaders ("her majesty"), including Zedekiah and his advisers, had fled like frightened stags that could find no pasture—even though they had been strong in the past (cf. 2 Kings 24:1, 12; 25:4-5; Jer. 39:4-5).

¹J. Renkema, *Lamentations*, p. 112.

²House, p. 349.

³*Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁴Chisholm, p. 359.

⁵Berlin, p. 10.

1:7 Jerusalem looked back on better times, now that she was in exile. She remembered how no other nations came to help her—but mocked her—when the Babylonians besieged her (e.g., Ammon, Moab, and Edom).

"The heathen used to mock at the Jews' Sabbath, as showing their idleness, and term them *Sabbatarians* ..."1

"To this day in Bible lands laughter does not occupy the place it does in the West. ... In the vast majority of cases, laughter is linked with scorn [cf. Gen. 17:17; 18:12; Job 8:21; Ps. 126:2]."2

Mental anguish accompanied physical hardship.

2. The cause of the desolation 1:8-11

1:8 Jerusalem's great sinning had resulted in her becoming unclean and despised, like an overexposed woman.

"In the ancient world to have one's naked body exposed, especially the genitals, was an utter disgrace."3

Jerusalem had embarrassed herself; her sins and vices had come to the light. Jeremiah began to explain why calamity had befallen Jerusalem.

"The theme of Jerusalem's sin, introduced in verse 5, is now examined more closely, and ultimately becomes one of the major theological emphases of the book."4

¹Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 662.

²Ellison, p. 704.

³Parry, p. 51.

⁴Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, p. 209.

- 1:9 The city had fallen because it had not considered the consequences of its apostasy (cf. Deut. 32:29; Isa. 47:7). Sin had stuck to her like dirt to the hem of a garment (cf. Lev. 5:3; 7:21). Now the enemy had gained the upper hand and there was no one to comfort her.
- 1:10 The Lord had allowed the Babylonians to force their way into the holy sanctuary and so desecrate it, and to steal its treasures. Gentiles and most Israelites were forbidden from entering the temple proper; only authorized Jewish priests could do so.
- "The image is of her being raped; indeed the plural 'nations' may suggest that she is gang-raped."¹
- "If YHWH's wife has been raped, then not only is she dishonored, *he is also!*"²
- 1:11 The residents of the city did not have enough to eat, even though they had given their valuables for food. The city cried out to Yahweh to look on her despised condition.

B. JERUSALEM'S SORROW OVER HER OWN CONDITION 1:12-22

In contrast to the first half of the lament, these verses present the picture of an inside observer looking out. Verses 12-19 record Jerusalem's call to people who had observed her desolation, and verses 20-22 contain her call to the Lord.

"It would appear that emotional and psychological progress is realized in this poem as it moves from a more distant, descriptive third-person reporting in verses 1-11 to a more personal, private first-person speech in verses 12-22."³

¹Parry, p. 54.

²Ibid.

³Kaiser, p. 44.

1. Jerusalem's call to onlookers 1:12-19

1:12 Jerusalem bewailed the lack of concern that her desolate condition drew from onlookers in this classic expression of grief. Her pain was uniquely great because the Lord had poured out His wrath on her.

"... real goodness is not indulgent of evil."¹

1:13 The Lord had sent fire into the city's bones when he allowed the Babylonians to burn it. He had captured Jerusalem as a prisoner in His net.

"The 'net' does not refer to a hunting implement, but to a military implement used to hold back captured men, preventing their escape. Such nets are pictured in ancient battle scenes, and are mentioned by other biblical writers, for example, Ezek 12:13 and 17:20 ..." ²

The Lord had thoroughly desolated and demoralized Jerusalem by removing all sustenance from her. This is a picture of a thoroughly "demoralized community."³

1:14 "The Lord" had put Jerusalem into a yoke like an ox. She had lost her freedom. Now others were controlling her, so that she could not stand by herself.

"... this name for God ["the Lord," *adonai*] signals the Lord's punishing sovereignty instead of his congenial sovereignty. At the very least the use of this particular name indicates specific, not general, types of judgment."⁴

"Unchecked sin can so bind its practitioners that all power to overcome it or the grip of those into whose hand such sinners eventually fall is spent

¹Price, p. 697.

²Berlin, p. 57.

³Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, p. 210.

⁴House, p. 359.

and gone. Only by reducing sinners to such desperate straits will some eventually listen and turn. Thus grief may often work a very wonderful work that none of the goodness or blessings of God will ever effect."¹

1:15 He had removed all the strong young men from the city, and He had trodden Jerusalem down as a virgin in a winepress. He had squeezed all the life out of her.

"Instead of gathering Israel for one of their traditional festivals where the people would at least speak of God, the Lord has called for a new festival, one that destroys the nation's choicest young men. Apparently this festival replaces those lost in 1:4!"²

Four metaphors describe God's judgment of Jerusalem in the last four verses: fire (v. 12), a net (v. 13), a yoke (v. 14), and a winepress (v. 15).

1:16 Jerusalem cried because of her condition and because no one sought to comfort or strengthen her (cf. v. 12). The people were desolate because Jerusalem's enemy had prevailed.

1:17 Rather than comforting Zion, who appealed with outstretched hands, her neighbors had withdrawn from her as from an unclean thing. Stretching out the hands is also a posture in prayer, so the idea may be that there was no divine response when the people prayed.³ The reference to "Jacob" indicates that all of his descendants, not just the people of Judah, were the objects of "the LORD['s]" chastening.

"From this point on the Lord ["Yahweh"] becomes a major topic of the book."⁴

¹Kaiser, p. 53.

²House, pp. 359-60.

³*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1323.

⁴House, p. 360.

1:18 The last part of the first acrostic poem, which begins here, records the city's detailed prayer to Yahweh.¹ By confessing that the Lord was right, the prophet expressed a most important truth (cf. Exod. 9:27; Deut. 32:4; Ezra 9:15; Neh. 9:33). He also confessed for the city her rebellion against the Lord's commands.

"The only reason men were in the place where they were in the days of Jeremiah, or are in our own post-Christian world, is that they have turned away from the propositional revelation of God and as such they are under the moral judgment of God."²

"Man does not want to accept the fact that God is angry with sin. Instead, the fact that God is love is played for all its worth. I agree that God is love, and the church certainly needs to learn to take the love of God into the marketplace of life. We have often failed to do that, but I feel that it has led to an over-emphasis on the love of God in this generation. God is righteous, and God is holy, and God is just in what He does."³

God's punishment of Jerusalem had been just. She mourned the loss of her young citizens who were now in exile.

"We believe verse 18 is the focal point, for on this verse pivots not only this chapter but any use made of this chapter for teaching or preaching."⁴

"The key verse in the Book of Lamentations [v. 18] explains the reason Jerusalem lay in ruin ..."⁵

1:19 The city had called to its political allies (i.e., Egypt and other Gentile nations) and its own leaders for help, but even the

¹Ibid., p. 361.

²Schaeffer, p. 28.

³J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 3:428.

⁴Kaiser, p. 45.

⁵McGee, 3:426.

priests and elders had been selfishly taking care of themselves rather than guarding the citizens. Another interpretation is that the priests and elders were not wrong in seeking their own welfare.¹ The second and third lines then just describe another aspect of Jerusalem's distress.

2. Jerusalem's call to the Lord 1:20-22

- 1:20 The city was greatly distressed because of the calamity that had come upon it (though not because of the sin that caused it²), due to its rebelliousness against Yahweh. The streets and houses had become places of death and now stood empty.
- 1:21 Jerusalem's enemies had heard of her calamity and had rejoiced over it. The city wished that God's predicted judgment of these enemies would come soon and that they would become like Jerusalem.
- 1:22 She asked God to consider the wickedness of these nations and to take vengeance on them for their treatment of Jerusalem—because she was weak and groaning under divine judgment for her transgressions.

"In a world filled with so much sorrow and pain men and women—especially believers—must cope with grief. But how? Jeremiah, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, would aid us in coping just as he aided himself and the grieving Jewish community on the heels of one of the greatest tragedies ever to befall Israel. In one of the most tear-filled chapters of the five in Lamentations, Israel (and the believing community through the centuries) was taught about coping with grief."³

"There is nothing more affecting than the sentiments produced in the heart by the conviction that the subject of

¹E.g., Parry, p. 63.

²Ibid., p. 64.

³Kaiser, pp. 46-47.

affliction is beloved of God, that He loves that which He is obliged to smite, and is obliged to smite that which He loves."¹

II. THE DIVINE PUNISHMENT OF JERUSALEM (THE SECOND LAMENT) CH. 2

One of the striking features of this lament is its emphasis on God's initiative in bringing destruction on Jerusalem and its people. Jeremiah saw Him as the One ultimately responsible for what had happened because He was angry over their sins.² Many different words describing Yahweh's hostility against His people appear in this chapter. This lament also describes in greater detail than chapter 1 the nature of the calamity that had befallen Judah. Whereas in chapter 1 the city is the main focus of the prophet's sorrow, in chapter 2 it is more the temple. In both chapters, the narrator and Zion speak.³

"The tone changes from shame and despair in chapter 1 to anger in chapter 2."⁴

"This second poem contains a new and more bitter lamentation regarding the fall of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah; and it is distinguished from the first, partly by the bitterness of the complaint, but chiefly by the fact that while, in the first, the oppressed, helpless, and comfortless condition of Jerusalem is the main feature,—here, on the other hand, it is the judgment which the Lord, in His wrath, has decreed against Jerusalem and Judah, that forms the leading thought in the complaint, as is shown by the prominence repeatedly given to the wrath, rage, burning wrath, etc. (ver. 1 ff.)."⁵

"One of the reasons Lamentations is so effective in its ministry to those who are suffering is that it deals head-on with the anger of God. Although God's anger is referred to in other

¹J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 2:395-96.

²See Parry, pp. 193-201, for theological reflections on the anger of God and the Day of the LORD.

³Provan, p. 57.

⁴Berlin, p. 67.

⁵Keil, 2:381.

chapters (1:12; 3:1, 43, 66; 4:11; 5:22), in Lamentations 2 we find a most detailed and resolute treatment of this difficult matter. In fact, before we have gone ten verses into the chapter there are forty descriptions of God's judgment and anger. Few if any aspects of life eluded His anger."¹

A. GOD'S ANGER 2:1-10

"We are, as it were, witnessing in slow motion the physical demolition of the city."²

"There are about forty descriptions of divine judgment, which fell upon every aspect of the Jews' life: home, religion, society, physical, mental and spiritual. Some of the blackest phrases of the book appear here ..."³

"Deut 27—28 [esp. 28:25-68; cf. Lev. 26:14-39] sets forth specific consequences for sin, many of which are found in Lamentations, especially in Lam 2."⁴

2:1 This chapter, like chapter 1, begins with *'eka*, "Alas!" Jeremiah pictured the sovereign Lord (Heb. *'adonay*) overshadowing Jerusalem, personified as a young woman, with a dark cloud because of His anger. The Lord had cast the city from the heights of glory to the depths of ignominy (cf. Isa. 14:12). It had been as a "footstool" for His feet, but He had not given it preferential treatment in His anger.

The footstool may be a reference to the ark of the covenant (cf. 1 Chron. 28:2; Ps. 99:5) or the temple, but it probably refers to Jerusalem, as does "the glory of Israel," though some take the latter as referring to the temple.⁵ It was perhaps "cast from heaven to earth" in the sense that this "glory" had now lost its connection with heaven.

¹Kaiser, p. 59. See pp. 59-62 for an excellent discussion of God's passibility (the quality or aptness in God to feel, suffer, or be angry) or impassibility (the denial of those qualities).

²Berlin, p. 67.

³Irving L. Jensen, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, p. 132.

⁴House, p. 397.

⁵E.g., Berlin, p. 68.

- 2:2 The Lord had devoured the cities of the Judahites without sparing them, and had overpowered their strongholds. He humbled the kingdom of Judah and its princes. Notice the increasingly narrow focus of God's anger: from all the "inhabitants," to the "strongholds" (fortified cities), to the "princes" of the nation.
- 2:3 In His fierce anger He also broke the strength of Israel, and had not restrained her enemy. He had judged Jacob severely, as when someone burns something up (cf. Exod. 13:21-22; 15:6-7, 12; Deut. 4:24; 29:22-23; Heb. 12:29).
- 2:4 He had also attacked His people like an archer, and had slain them—even though they were His favored nation. The fire of His anger had burned her habitations. He destroyed everything that they valued. "All that were pleasant to the eye" may refer to the children of Jerusalem.¹ The "tent" probably refers to the temple (cf. Ps. 15:1; 27:5; 61:4; 78:60).
- 2:5 Yahweh had become like an enemy to His people, consuming and destroying the vast majority of them, and causing mourning and moaning among them all (cf. Lev. 26:17, 25, 34, 36-41; Deut. 28:25, 31, 68).
- 2:6 He tore down His own temple like a temporary booth—the kind that farmers erected in their fields for a short time and then demolished. He caused the ending of feasts and Sabbath observances in Zion, and showed no regard for the kings and priests of Judah. He had made it impossible for His people to worship Him corporately.
- 2:7 He rejected the altar of burnt offerings and the temple, having delivered the temple precincts to the Babylonians. Israel's enemy, rather than the Judahites, now made noise in the temple.

"To many in the ancient world the destruction of YHWH's temple was proof that he was not as strong as the gods of the invaders. But the poet is emphatic that weakness on God's part was not

¹Parry, p. 75.

the reason for the loss of the sanctuary—*Adonai himself* lay behind the destruction of his temple."¹

2:8 The Lord also destroyed Jerusalem's walls and broke down her defenses with His "hand." What a "hand" the Lord must have to be able to crush Jerusalem's walls and defense towers!

"Ordinarily, the builder stretches out a line to build a straight wall, but here God stretches out a line to destroy the wall. The expression implies intentional planning on God's part, which makes his action seem more cruel."²

2:9 The city gates with their bars were no longer effective in keeping Jerusalem safe, and the king (Jehoiakim) and his advisers had gone into exile. The Mosaic Law now failed to govern the Israelites since they could no longer observe its cultic ordinances. Yahweh had also stopped giving His prophets revelations of His will.

"... when Jerusalem was destroyed, Israel received no prophetic communication, ... God the Lord did not then send them a message to comfort and sustain them."³

"This judgment of silence is manifest in the book of Lamentations as a whole, in which YHWH is the one actor that the implied reader is desperate to hear speak, and thus YHWH's lack of voice is very conspicuous."⁴

2:10 The most respected leaders of the Israelites had suffered humiliation, and now sat on the ground with dust on their heads, signs of mourning. Girding with sackcloth and bowing to the ground also expressed grief over what the Lord had done. Thus the Lord broke down the old male elders of the nation and its young female virgins, representing all the people, as

¹Ibid., p. 77.

²Berlin, p. 71.

³Keil, 2:391.

⁴Parry, p. 79.

well as its walls. He humbled the people to "the ground" as He reduced the city to "the ground."

"Even though God was exceedingly angry with Judah His anger was not like a hidden force, incalculable and arbitrary, hitting where and when it wished without any rhyme or reason. Instead His anger was measured out and controlled by both His love and justice. It was at once an expression of outrage against the sin, evil, and wickedness perpetrated as well as a personal note of continued caring. Had He not cared or loved so intently He would not have troubled Himself to call His wandering sinners back to His embrace."¹

B. JEREMIAH'S GRIEF 2:11-19

This section contains five pictures of Jerusalem's condition.² Notice the change from the third person, in the previous section, to the first person in this one.

"The narrator has moved from a more detached observer role to a fully engaged one where he emotionally identifies with Jerusalem."³

"The anger of the first part of the chapter fades into mourning in the second part."⁴

2:11-12 Jeremiah had exhausted his capacity for weeping and sorrowing over the destruction of his people; he felt drained emotionally. "My heart is poured out" is literally "My liver is poured out," the liver being regarded as the seat of deep emotion. The prophet observed small children and infants fainting in the streets for lack of food and drink. They were dying in their mothers' arms for lack of nourishment. *Jerusalem was a place of starvation.*

¹Kaiser, p. 62.

²Dyer, "Lamentations," pp. 1215-16.

³Parry, p. 80.

⁴Berlin, p. 72.

"This speech's syntax is so similar to some found in Jeremiah that the speaker must be identified as Jeremiah or as a person that has thoroughly embraced his theology."¹

2:13 For the first time in the book, the narrator speaks directly to "daughter ... Jerusalem." Jeremiah struggled to find adequate words to comfort his people because their ruin had been so devastating (cf. 1:12). Comfort was beyond the scope of human words because the devastation of the city was unparalleled. No human being could heal her—only the Lord. *Jerusalem was a place of no comfort.*

"We endeavor to comfort our friends by telling them their case is not singular; there are many whose trouble is greater than theirs; but Jerusalem's case will not admit this argument ... We tell them that their case is not desperate, but that it may easily be remedied; but neither will that be admitted here, upon a view of human probabilities ..."²

"Lamentations is not a book of consolation; it is a book that refuses to console, keeping the moment of grief always in focus."³

2:14 The false prophets had misled the people (cf. v. 9; Jer. 2:5; 10:15; 14:13; 16:19). They had not told them the truth that would have led them to return to God and spared them from captivity. They may still have been failing the people.

"What is clear is that, instead of exposing sin so that it could be dealt with, they just painted over it to hide it from view (cf. Ezek 13:10-16)."⁴

Jerusalem was a place of perverted leadership.

¹House, p. 385. See also N. C. Lee, *The Singers of Lamentation*, pp. 147-48.

²Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1028.

³Berlin, p. 73.

⁴Parry, p. 81.

2:15-17 In chapter 1, "Lady Jerusalem" called passers-by to observe (and grieve over) her sorrow (1:12). Now we learn that the reaction of these observers was not sorrow but shock and derision. Passersby expressed their amazement at Jerusalem's great destruction. They could hardly believe that it had been such a beautiful and happy place (cf. Ps. 48:2). Judah's enemies rejoiced to see the evidence of her fall. They took pride in seeing her destruction. "Clap their hands," "hiss," and "shake their heads" are terms normally associated with mocking.¹

Jerusalem's destruction was the fulfillment of the destruction that Yahweh, long ago, had told His people might come (cf. Lev. 26:14-46; Deut. 28:15-68). He was ultimately responsible for it. He had shown no mercy in judging, but instead had strengthened Judah's enemy against her and had caused him to rejoice at the city's overthrow. *Jerusalem was a place of mocking enemies.*

"Jerusalem's destruction was no act of random violence. Rather, it was a specific act by God intended to punish the long-term sins of a specific nation, Israel. Thus, this verse has a very specific frame of reference and should not be applied to every city's fall."²

2:18-19 Jeremiah called on Judah's citizens or children, or, less likely, her enemies, to mourn perpetually because of the destruction that God had brought on her.³ The Jerusalemites should cry out to God without ceasing ("at the beginning of the [three] night watches," that is, throughout the night as well as during the day) and ask Him to spare their children who were dying of starvation. Since He had inflicted such a deep wound on the people, He was the only One who could heal it. *Jerusalem was a place of ceaseless wailing.*

¹House, p. 389. See also Keil, 2:395; and E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2 and Lamentations*, p. 489.

²House, p. 390.

³Renkema, p. 308; House, pp. 391-92; Parry, p. 83.

How could God allow innocent children to suffer because of the sins of their parents? Perhaps a better question would be: How could parents continue to sin knowing that God would inevitably judge them *and their children* (cf. Jer. 6:11; 9:20-21)? How could they do that to their children?

"It may also lead one to marvel that a renewed relationship is possible at all between God and people who ignore warnings about their children's safety. According to 2:11-19 such a new beginning is not only possible; it is the way for the parents to redeem themselves and spare their offspring further agony."¹

C. JERUSALEM'S PLEA 2:20-22

This last pericope is another prayer to the Lord (cf. 1:20-22). The personified city prayed a prayer with an attitude of protest—"the strongest protest against God in the entire book."²

2:20 "Daughter Jerusalem" responded to Jeremiah's call to prayer (cf. 1:11) by asking the Lord to consider who was suffering so greatly that women were cannibalizing their own newborn children to stay alive in the famine (cf. Lev. 26:27-29; Deut. 28:53-57; 2 Kings 6:24-31). Would He allow such a fate for healthy children? Would He permit the slaying of Judahite priests and prophets in the very temple of the Lord? Jerusalem seems to be trying to shock the Lord into action.

2:21 People of all ages and both sexes, even the youths who were the hope of Judah's future, lay dead in the streets because the Lord had "slaughtered" them without sparing.

2:22 There had been as much carnage in the city as there was on feast days, when the priests slew large quantities of sacrificial animals. Instead of Israelite pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the annual feasts, Israel's enemies had come to Jerusalem to feast on the Israelites! Thus there were

¹House, p. 393.

²Parry, p. 85.

"terrors on every side" (cf. Jer. 6:25; 20:3; 20:10; 46:5; 49:29).

"No one" had escaped Yahweh's anger, not even the children whom the city had produced, when the Babylonian enemy "annihilated" them. This is hyperbolic language, since some people had survived the destruction of Jerusalem. The phrase "the day of the LORD's anger" closes this second chapter poem as it opened it (cf. v. 1), "enclosing the whole within the embrace of divine wrath."¹

"Lam 1—2 ... bring to bear a ... theological stream, which is found in the type of poems found in Pss 73—89, where the kingdom's fall is a major theme. For example, Pss 74 and 89 mourn the loss of temple and Davidic monarchy. Besides expressing shock, sorrow, and confusion, these texts have a 'What now?' flavor to them. In Lamentations[,] chapters 3—5 take up the 'What now?' theme, while in Psalms[,] chaps. 90—106 serve the same function. Both Lamentations and Psalms use lament forms to express the many types and levels of pain and outrage Israel felt."²

III. THE PROPHET'S RESPONSE TO DIVINE JUDGMENT (THE THIRD LAMENT) CH. 3

As mentioned previously, this lament is an acrostic in triplets; the same succeeding Hebrew consonant begins three verses instead of just one, as in the previous chapters. The verses are about one third as long as most of those in the first two chapters.

This chapter also differs from the others in this book, in that: it contains a first-person narrative of the prophet's reactions to the sufferings he endured as the Lord's faithful servant. It is similar to the "confessions" sections in the Book of Jeremiah, where the prophet opens up and lets the reader into his heart and mind (cf. Jer. 11:18-20; 12:1-4; 15:10-18; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-10, 14-18).

¹Ibid.

²House, p. 397.

I am assuming that Jeremiah is the speaker, but many other individuals have been suggested: Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, an anonymous sufferer, a surviving soldier, a defeated strongman, a collective voice of the people, a prominent resident of Jerusalem, everyman, and the personified voice of the exile.¹ We know that he was a male (Heb. *geber*, v. 1), in contrast to the female voice of the city in chapter 1.

"Jeremiah proposes his own experience under afflictions, as an example as to how the Jews should behave under theirs, so as to have hope of a restoration; hence the change from *singular* to *plural* (vv. 22, 40-47)."²

Faithful servants of the Lord of all ages can identify with many of the prophet's sentiments expressed here. The title of Psalm 102 could serve as an appropriate prefix to this chapter: "A prayer of the afflicted, when he is faint, and pours out his complaint to the Lord."

"Chapter 3 is the heart of Jeremiah's short book. This chapter gives the book a positive framework around which the other chapters revolve. The black velvet of sin and suffering in chapters 1—2 and 4—5 serves as a fitting backdrop to display the sparkling brilliance of God's loyal love in chapter 3."³

In parts of this chapter, Jeremiah spoke for the people of Jerusalem and Judah, as well as for himself (e.g., vv. 22, 40-47).

"He speaks as a representative Israelite, facing the dark and baffling ways of Providence."⁴

"In many respects this elegy crystallizes the basic themes of Lamentations, and as a fore-shadowing of the passion of Jesus Christ has definite affinities with Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22."⁵

House divided this chapter into four sections:

"The first section [3:1-24] emphasizes what a first-person speaker has learned about suffering and about God's

¹See Berlin, p. 84.

²Jamieson, et al., p. 664.

³Dyer, "Lamentations," p. 1216.

⁴Price, p. 698.

⁵Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, p. 223.

faithfulness. The second section [3:25-39] highlights the speaker's response to God's sovereignty and goodness. The third section [3:40-47] calls for prayer in light of what Israel's enemies have done, and the fourth section [3:48-66] expresses confidence in God's positive actions on Israel's behalf. This structure moves readers, or attempts to move readers at least, from reflective advice to confidence in God's ultimate goodness."¹

I have divided the chapter somewhat differently.

A. JEREMIAH'S SORROWS 3:1-18

"... this speaker does not address God himself but a human audience, transforming the accusation into a description of misery."²

3:1 Jeremiah (the narrator³) claimed to have seen much affliction because Yahweh had struck Jerusalem in His anger (cf. Job 9:34; 21:9; Ps. 89:32; Isa. 10:5). By describing himself as "*the* man," rather than *a* man, he may have been implying that he had suffered more than all in his community. The Good Shepherd's "rod" had become an instrument of torture for him, rather than one of comfort (cf. Ps. 23:4).

"The two preceding poems ended with sorrowful complaint [and began with "How" or "Alas," as does chapter 4]. This third poem begins with the complaint of a man over grievous personal suffering."⁴

"Thus Jeremiah is that individual who suffers in many ways beyond all others; but he is also the representative sufferer for all Israel by virtue of

¹House, p. 409.

²Parry, p. 96.

³Provan, p. 81.

⁴Keil, 2:402-3.

his role as the prophet of the Lord who pled with, prayed for, and preached to his people Israel."¹

- 3:2-3 The Lord had driven the prophet to walk in the darkness of His judgment, rather than in the light of His blessing and presence (cf. v. 6). The Lord had disciplined him repeatedly for a long time, in that while He was judging Jerusalem, Jeremiah was suffering along with the people. The Lord's "hand" had been heavy upon him (cf. 1:14; 2:8).
- 3:4 Jeremiah's suffering included sickness and pain, as when someone does not get enough food to eat or breaks a bone (cf. Ps. 42:10; Prov. 5:11). Fever pains sometimes resemble the pain of a broken bone (cf. 1:13-15; 2:9, 11; Job 30:17; Ps. 32:3-4; 51:8; Isa. 38:13). He may have experienced these physical ailments, or he may have simply described his inner pain in terms of physical afflictions.
- 3:5-6 Bitter experiences and hardship had assailed the prophet as Yahweh had judged His people (cf. Jer. 8:14). Jeremiah's existence had turned into a living death for him (cf. Ps. 143:3).
- 3:7 The Lord had imprisoned His prophet in his affliction; he could not escape from it (cf. Job 19:8; Ps. 88:8; Jer. 38:6; Hos. 2:6).
- 3:8-9 The Lord would not ease his suffering in answer to prayer (cf. Ps. 18:42; Jer. 7:16). He even discouraged Jeremiah from praying (cf. Jer. 11:14; 14:11). It was as though the Lord had opposed Jeremiah's progress toward restoration and made it very difficult.
- 3:10-11 Jeremiah felt like the Lord was lying in wait to devour him, like a wild animal (cf. Ps. 10:9; 17:12). The Lord had desolated Jeremiah by opposing his ways and making him feel torn apart.
- 3:12 Jeremiah felt as though he was a target that the Lord was shooting at and that Yahweh had wounded him severely (cf. Job 16:13).

¹Kaiser, p. 76.

3:13 This verse completes the image of the former verse. The arrows found their target in Jeremiah's internal organs (cf. Job 19:27; Prov. 23:16).

3:14-15 The prophet's contemporaries mocked and ridiculed him constantly. He was socially isolated in his suffering. He had become full of bitter experiences, like poison, which the Lord had given him to drink (cf. 2:4; Job 9:18).

"Wormwood is the name given to certain plants used for imparting a bitter flavor to some drinks; the name has no connection with either worm or wood."¹

3:16 Jeremiah felt like his teeth were broken and that God had given him stones to eat instead of bread.

"... the teeth have become broken and ground down because God has given His people stones to eat as punishment for venerating the images of Baal."²

"This is no *self*-humbling before God—God himself grinds the man's teeth in the gravel and presses him down into the dust."³

3:17-18 Jeremiah had forgotten what peace and happiness were like. He had also lost his strength and his hope.

"It is not so much that peace has left him, more that he has been banished from the realm of peace ..."⁴

"He has indeed become a sort of 'everyman'; that is, *us*. So we will see ourselves and our own problems with suffering. Likewise, we also argue that the individual spoken about here is no one

¹Ellison, p. 718.

²Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, p. 224.

³Parry, p. 99.

⁴Provan, p. 89

else but the prophet Jeremiah. And because he suffered representatively as God's delegated sufferer he mirrors perfectly, and by divine design, another prophet who would one day also suffer as did the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 52:13—53:12."¹

"This is perhaps the lowest point of the whole poem."²

"Yet the naming of YHWH for the first time in the poem may, in retrospect, be seen as the first glimmer of a recovery of hope."³

B. JEREMIAH'S HOPE 3:19-40

"This section [3:19-24] provides a transition from stating the extreme hardships of the past to confessing God's faithfulness as a beginning for a new season of faith for himself and for all who will agree with his conclusions."⁴

3:19 Jeremiah prayed that the Lord would remember his affliction and bitterness (cf. vv. 1, 7, 15; Job 13:15).

3:20-21 He himself remembered something that gave him hope. The next verse explains what that was.

"As long as we contemplate our troubles, the more convinced we will become of our isolation, our hopelessness, our inability to extricate ourselves from the present trouble. But when we focus on the Lord, we are able finally to rise above, rather than to suffer under, our troubles."⁵

¹Kaiser, p. 77.

²Provan, p. 90.

³Parry, p. 99.

⁴House, p. 413.

⁵*The Nelson ...*, p. 1327.

3:22 The prophet remembered that the Lord's loyal love (Heb. *hesed*) never ceases and that He is ceaselessly compassionate.

"In essence, *hesed* is just an Old Testament way of saying that God is gracious and God is love [cf. Exod. 34:6]."¹

"How could the writer be stating what he does in the book and not be upset with God? How can God be good in view of human suffering? The answer is that in the middle of all that suffering, God is faithful, merciful, and the one to whom people can turn and know that he is a good and merciful God."²

"That even a kernel of the people of God remains is because of the grace and love of God."³

"... Lam 3:22 agrees with one of the most extraordinary teachings in the OT. Though Israel sinned against God through idolatry, immorality, oppression, and other forms of long-term covenant adultery to such an extent that he finally punishes severely, the Lord will still start over with penitent Israelites. In other words, God's determination to bless and heal is as thorough and unusual as his determination to punish, if not more so. The road back to covenantal relationship may well be long and difficult, especially given the level of sin and the depth of punishment. Nonetheless, it is possible to begin."⁴

3:23 There are new evidences of Yahweh's lovingkindness and compassion every day that testify to His great faithfulness (cf. Ps. 36:5, 7). His daily provision of manna for the Israelites in

¹Kaiser, p. 79.

²Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Writing Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi)," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 156.

³Kaiser, p. 81.

⁴House, p. 414.

the wilderness was only one example of this. In this verse, Jeremiah addressed God Himself.

"The word translated 'compassions' draws attention to God's emotional response to the needs of His people [cf. Gen. 43:30; 1 Kings 3:26]. The terms rendered 'love' [or "lovingkindness"] and 'faithfulness' are closely related in meaning [cf. Ps. 89:24; 92:2; 98:3; Hos. 2:19-20]. They refer to God's devotion to His covenant people and to the promises He made to them."¹

"Not only is it true that God will not change in His faithfulness—He cannot change. He never cools off in His commitment to us. He never breaks a promise or loses enthusiasm. He stays near us when we reject His counsel and deliberately disobey Him just as much as when we are zealous for the truth. He remains intimately involved in our lives whether we are giving Him praise in prayer or grieving Him with our actions. Whether we are running to Him or from Him, He remains faithful. His faithfulness is unconditional, unending, and unswerving. Nothing we do can diminish it, and nothing we stop doing can increase it. It remains great. Even when you blow it. Even when you make a stupid decision. Even when your world is shaken by betrayal. God's faithfulness never diminishes."²

"The startling fact about this announcement is that it is made against one of the bleakest backgrounds in the Old Testament. It would be as if someone had stood up in one of the prison camps of the Third Reich and announced loudly: 'Great is God's faithfulness.' That might seem

¹Chisholm, p. 362.

²Charles R. Swindoll, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, p. 939. Paragraph division omitted.

ludicrous enough to bring the scornful sneer of every destitute soul confined to those barracks."¹

This verse was, of course, the basis for the classic Christian hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" by Thomas O. Chisholm (b. 1866). It has also inspired modern composers (e.g., "The steadfast love of the Lord never faileth; His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning, new every morning; Great is Thy faithfulness, oh Lord, great is Thy faithfulness ...").

3:24 Jeremiah's recollection of God's character transformed his attitude (cf. v. 18). He reminded himself that Yahweh was his portion. Consequently he had hope (cf. Num. 18:20). By calling the Lord his portion, the prophet was comparing Yahweh to an allotment of land that provides the necessities of life (cf. Ps. 16:5-6; 73:26; 119:57; 142:5).

"To have God for our portion is the one only foundation of hope."²

3:25-26 Having experienced an "attitude adjustment," Jeremiah now proceeded to offer some wise advice on suffering and how to handle it, in verses 25-39. It is only after one has focused on God, rather than on one's own suffering, that he or she can provide real help for others who are suffering.

Those who wait for the Lord and seek Him eventually experience His goodness.

"Not God's love, but his anger is a passing phase."³

Waiting for the Lord's deliverance silently is a good practice (cf. Ps. 37:9; Hos. 12:6; Zeph. 3:8; Rom. 8:25; Gal. 5:5). But this advice seems to run contrary to the approach taken in the rest of the book where there is anything but silence. Perhaps

¹Kaiser, p. 80.

²Jamieson, et al., p. 664.

³Delbert R. Hillars, *Lamentations*, p. 129.

Parry is correct that "it is not a *literal* silence that the man is recommending but an attitude of expectant trust."¹

"While we *wait for him* by faith, we must *seek him* by prayer. Our seeking will help to keep up our waiting."²

In verses 25-27, the *tet* stanza of this poem, each word not only begins with the same Hebrew *letter*, but with the same Hebrew *word: tob*, "good."

3:27 Likewise shouldering the heavy burden of God's revealed will in one's youth is a good thing. Other views of the "yoke" in view are the yoke of sin,³ and the yoke of suffering.⁴ However, all three of these things could have been in the writer's mind, since they are so closely related. The speaker's point seems to be that it is (normally) easier for young people to bear a burden than it is for older people.

"Early discipline begets mature dependability."⁵

3:28 Such a person should bear his burden alone, with trust and without complaining, since God has placed it on him (cf. Ps. 39:2; 94:17). I do not think that Jeremiah meant that we should suffer in deliberate isolation from other people, but that if we have to suffer alone, it should be with an attitude of humility.

3:29 The sufferer should also humble himself since there is hope that God will help him.

"The expression ['Let him put his mouth in the dust'] is derived from the Oriental custom of throwing oneself in the most reverential manner on the ground, and involves the idea of humble

¹Parry, p. 104.

²Henry, p. 1029.

³House, p. 416.

⁴Keil, 2:415; Provan, p. 95; Parry, p. 104.

⁵Price, p. 699.

silence, because the mouth, placed in the dust, cannot speak."¹

"Perhaps there is hope" may seem to suggest that there may be no hope forthcoming, but it is probably an acknowledgement that God is sovereign and cannot be manipulated into operating on our timetable.

3:30 The afflicted do well to yield to the antagonism of others and to allow others to heap reproach on them, rather than retaliating (cf. Matt. 5:39; 26:67; Luke 22:64; John 18:22; 19:3).

"Many take patiently afflictions from God, but when man wrongs them, they take it impatiently. The godly bear resignedly the latter, like the former, as sent by God (Ps. 17:13)."²

3:31-32 The Lord's rejection of His own is only temporary (cf. Jer. 3:5, 12). Compassion and loyal love will replace grief eventually (cf. Job 5:18; Ps. 30:5; Isa. 54:8). This is the reason ("For") why the sufferer should adopt the attitude just advocated in the previous verses.

"God gets *no pleasure* from inflicting pain on people—his judgments are not the way he *wants* to relate to humanity but are his response to human sin. Punishment is an 'alien' work of God given reluctantly and after numerous warnings."³

3:33 "The expression 'he does not afflict from the heart' is the high watermark in Lamentations' understanding of God. ... The angry side of his nature, turned so unflinchingly against Jerusalem, is not the determinative factor in the divine purposes. Begrudgingly, regretfully, if there is no other way toward his higher purposes, he may

¹Keil, 2:416.

²Jamieson, et al., p. 664.

³Parry, p. 106.

unleash the forces of evil, but 'his heart' is not in it [cf. Isa. 28:21]."¹

"This stanza [vv. 31-33] contains perhaps the most profound theological insight of the whole book, and its location is perhaps no coincidence. *Right at the literal center of the book of Lamentations is an appreciation of the being of YHWH as the ground of hope.*"²

3:34-36 The Lord disapproves of injustice in its many forms and of the brutal oppression of prisoners (cf. Ps. 69:33; 146:7; Isa. 42:7; Luke 4:18).

3:37-38 The plans of those who anticipate a particular future only come to fruition if the sovereign Lord ordains them. The Most High is the ultimate source of all good and bad things.

3:39 Jeremiah wondered how anyone could complain against God, since all "living" (alive after Jerusalem's destruction) human beings, or anyone for that matter, are sinners and therefore deserve divine punishment.

"Why should anyone complain if they don't like the consequences of their actions?"³

C. JEREMIAH'S PRAYER 3:40-66

The following section of the lament falls into two parts, marked by Jeremiah's use of the plural (vv. 41-47) and singular personal pronouns (vv. 48-66). In the first part, he called on the Judahites to confess their sins to God. In the second part, he recalled God's past deliverance in answer to prayer, which motivated him to ask God to judge his enemies. In both sections, the prophet modeled proper behavior for his people.

¹N. K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, p. 99.

²Parry, p. 105.

³*Ibid.*, p. 114.

1. A recollection of past sins 3:40-47

3:40 Jeremiah counseled self-examination, repentance, and returning to the Lord. Was the people's suffering due to sin? Silence (vv. 26, 28) and trust (vv. 24, 29) are not enough. Repentance (v. 40) should follow recognition of sin (v. 39).

"Jeremiah wrote seven principles about the nature of Israel's affliction: (1) Affliction should be endured with hope in God's salvation, that is, ultimate restoration (Lam. 3:25-30). (2) Affliction is only temporary and is tempered by God's compassion and love (vv. 31-32). (3) God does not delight in affliction (v. 33). (4) If affliction comes because of injustice, God sees it and does not approve of it (vv. 34-36). (5) Affliction is always in relationship to God's sovereignty (vv. 37-38; cf. Job 2:10). (6) Affliction ultimately came because of Judah's sins (Lam. 3:39). (7) Affliction should accomplish the greater good of turning God's people back to Him (v. 40)."¹

3:41 Leading his community, Jeremiah lifted up his heart, as well as his hands, to God in heaven; his praying was heartfelt, not just formal.

3:42 The first step in repentance is confession: Jeremiah and his people had transgressed the covenant (cf. 1:5, 14, 22) and had rebelled against the Lord (cf. 1:18, 20), and He had not pardoned their sin but allowed them to experience judgment.

3:43 The Lord had become angry over the sins of His people and had pursued them in judgment, slaying them without stinting.

3:44 The Lord had blocked Himself off from His people, as a cloud blocks the heavens, so their prayers would not affect Him (cf. 2:1; Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11-12).

¹Dyer, "Lamentations," p. 1218.

"Nowhere in Lamentations, and perhaps in the entire Bible, is God's refusal to be present more strongly expressed."¹

3:45-46 The Lord had made the Judahites as scum (Heb. *sehi*), namely, rejected as unfit for use (cf. 1:7-8; 2:15-16). This Hebrew word occurs only here in the Old Testament. This is how the other nations regarded them. Judah's enemies had also spoken against her (cf. 2:16).

3:47 The results of God's judgment for the Judahites had been panic. They had stumbled into pits that ensnared them. Devastation and destruction had become their allotment.

2. A recollection of past deliverance 3:48-66

3:48-51 Jeremiah wept profusely and unremittingly because of the destruction that the Judahites had experienced (cf. 2:11; Jer. 9:1; 14:17). He would do this until the Lord acknowledged the plight of His people by sending them some relief.

"The man's eyes see and weep. But YHWH does not see (as indicated by the fact that he has not acted to save) [cf. vv. 44, 50]."²

What Jeremiah saw of the devastation of Jerusalem pained him greatly. Here "the daughters of my city" may refer to the dependent villages surrounding Jerusalem that the foe also took.³ Or "the daughters" could refer to the young women of Jerusalem.⁴ Both interpretations fit the context, and it is probably impossible to tell which meaning was in Jeremiah's mind when he wrote this statement.

3:52 Here Jeremiah began to tell his own story (cf. vv. 1-18), in order to encourage his fellow sufferers.

¹Berlin, p. 96.

²Parry, p. 118.

³Jamieson, et al., p. 665.

⁴House, p. 425.

"The change in the man's attitude found in 3:19-24 has affected the way in which he perceived his situation. It is interesting that now, in this final section, he no longer speaks of YHWH as his enemy but rather as the one who can deliver him from his human enemies. The recovery of hope has not led him to deny that YHWH is the ultimate cause of his distress, but it has led to a shift in emphasis. The focus now is on the immediate cause of his sorrow (his human enemies) and on God as his savior."¹

The prophet's enemies had pursued him mercilessly, through no fault of his own, as hunters track a bird.

3:53-54 They silenced him by placing him in a pit and covering its mouth with a large stone (cf. Jer. 38:1-6; Gen. 37:24). He thought he would drown because of the water that engulfed him (cf. Gen. 37:20). This description could be a continuation of the metaphor of the previous verse. The "pit" is a frequent symbol of the place of death (Ps. 28:1; 30:3; 88:5; 143:7; Prov. 1:12). Or Jeremiah may have been relating his actual experience.

3:55-56 Jeremiah prayed to the Lord out of his desperate condition (cf. Ps. 88:7, 14; 130:1; Jon. 2:1-3). He believed the Lord had heard his prayer, and he begged that the Lord would pay attention to his petition and grant him deliverance.

"Prayer is the breath of the new man, sucking in the air of mercy in petitions and returning it in praises; it is both the evidence and the maintenance of the spiritual life."²

3:57 In the past, the Lord had heeded Jeremiah's prayers and had given him hope. The Lord had come to his rescue and had redeemed (delivered) him from destruction (cf. Lev. 25:25-28, 47-54; Ruth 4:1-12). This is the first and only time in

¹Parry, p. 119.

²Henry, p. 1030.

Lamentations that God speaks to the sufferers and gives evidence of hearing and answering their prayers. Significantly, His words were: "Do not fear!"

3:58 The Lord had not only comforted Jeremiah with His words, but he also acted to rescue him from his distressing situation.

"No greater testimony can a sinner offer to God than to say, in thanksgiving, 'Thou hast redeemed my life' (3:58)."¹

"Here is a hint of the light of the New Testament gospel in the dark pages of the Book of Lamentations. The only way that God would be able to *plead the case* of His people was if He Himself paid for—or redeemed them from—their sinfulness."²

The Jerusalemites would have been encouraged and strengthened by God's responses to Jeremiah. The Lord had listened to him, had drawn near to him, had comforted him, and had redeemed him. Might not He do the same for them?

3:59-61 Jeremiah knew that Yahweh had seen his affliction. He asked that He would judge him, knowing that the Lord would be fair. Though God had redeemed him, his enemies had not yet been punished.

"Perhaps because of their status as the Chosen People the Jews were always sensitive to abuse and injury inflicted from outside, whatever the source. Consequently they found it impossible to overlook these hostile acts, with the result that the imprecations which they hurled at their enemies, while typical of such Near Eastern utterances, seem to possess an unexpected and unusual degree of vindictiveness (*cf.* Ps. 137:9)."³

¹Jensen, p. 135.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 1328.

³Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, p. 231.

- 3:62-63 The prophet's enemies plotted against him constantly, but he called on God to witness all that his enemies were doing and how they had mocked him (cf. v. 30).
- 3:64-65 Jeremiah believed, as he requested, that the Lord would pay his enemies back as they deserved (cf. 1:21-22; Ps. 28:4; 2 Cor. 3:17). He would harden their hearts and so bring judgment on them.
- 3:66 Jeremiah prayed and believed that the Lord would pursue his enemies anywhere they might go—and destroy them in His anger! The Lord did this to many of Jeremiah's personal enemies when the city fell to the Babylonians (cf. Jer. 39:4-7; 52:7-11, 24-27), but here the prophet was appealing for a judgment of the Babylonians for destroying Jerusalem. These imprecations voiced Jeremiah's longing for God to vindicate His righteousness. They express his zeal for the honor of the Lord and His kingdom, and they reflect God's own attitude toward sin and impenitent sinners.¹

"The heaven of Jahveh is the whole world, over which Jahveh's authority extends; the meaning therefore is 'Exterminate them wholly from the sphere of Thy dominion in the world,' or, Thy kingdom."²

"Several commentators consider Lam 3 the theological heart of the book ... This decision is appropriate in many ways, for this chapter sets forth the book's clearest expression of God's character and attitude toward the suffering nation. This chapter also provides the nation its most extensive instruction on how to relate to the Lord at this point in its history."³

"He [the writer] stresses the nature of suffering, the character of God, the way to think through the implications of suffering in relation to God's character, and the way to pray after the

¹Kaiser, p. 95.

²Keil, 2:429.

³House, p. 429.

suffering has been mentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally 'digested.'"¹

IV. THE ANGER OF YAHWEH (THE FOURTH LAMENT) CH. 4

The fourth lament is similar to the second one, in that: they both describe God's judgment of Jerusalem and Judah.

"The lamentation over the terrible calamity that has befallen Jerusalem is distinguished in this poem from the lamentations in chap. i. and ii., not merely by the fact that in it the fate of the several classes of the population is contemplated, but chiefly by the circumstances that the calamity is set forth as a well-merited punishment by God for the grievous sins of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This consideration forms the chief feature in the whole poem, from the beginning to the end of which there predominates the hope that Zion will not perish, but that the appointed punishment will terminate, and then fall on their now triumphant enemies."²

"The tone [of Lamentations 4] is more matter-of-fact' exhibiting 'a relaxation of the more intense emotion of the earlier poems [with an absence of] the vividness imparted there by the dramatic appearance of various speakers and especially by the personification of Zion.'³ Now that the zenith of emotion and theology has been reached in Lamentations 3:22-24, the intensities of the 'front steps' to that focal point [i.e., chapters 1 and 2] may now be eased and a time provided for quietly 'mopping up' what remains of the grief process."⁴

"As in the first three poems, two voices are found in chapter 4. The narrator appears in vv. 1-16, 21-22; and the people of Zion in vv. 17-20. In other respects, however, the fourth poem is quite different from these. It is considerably shorter, each stanza being divided into two rather than three lines; there is

¹Ibid., p. 430.

²Keil, 2:430-31.

³Delbert Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 86.

⁴Kaiser, p. 97.

no prayer to God, who is referred to only in the third person; and it ends on a note of assurance (v. 22a)."¹

A. CONDITIONS DURING THE SIEGE 4:1-11

This dark section of the poem consists of two parallel parts (vv. 1-6, 7-11). The Judahites had become despised (vv. 1-2, 7-8), and both children and adults (everyone) suffered (vv. 3-5, 9-10). This calamity was the result of Yahweh's punishment for sin (vv. 6, 11).

1. The first description of siege conditions 4:1-6

4:1 This lament resumes the characteristic "How" or "Alas" (Heb. *'eka*) introduction (cf. 1:1; 2:1). The gold and precious stones that had decorated the temple no longer served that function. The gold was now dirty, and the gems had been torn from their mountings.

4:2 Jeremiah compared the precious inhabitants of Jerusalem (cf. Exod. 19:5-6) to gold and gems. They now lay in the streets of the city defiled and dead.

"For those who esteemed themselves as high-quality gold, the kind of experience which reduced them to the level of base metal in the opinion of their enemies was of harrowing psychological and spiritual proportions."²

The enemy had regarded the citizens of Jerusalem, who were more valuable to it than gold, as worth nothing more than earthenware pots. The Chaldeans had smashed many of them. Earthenware pottery was of such little value in the ancient Near East, that people would not repair it but simply replace it.

4:3 The horrors of the siege of Jerusalem had turned the once-compassionate women of Judah into selfish creatures unwilling to give of themselves for the welfare of their young. Like

¹Provan, pp. 109-10.

²Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, p. 232.

ostriches that do not care for their offspring (cf. Job 39:14-18), these women had abandoned and even eaten their children. They behaved worse than loathsome jackals, which at least nurse their young. The children were suffering because of the sins of their parents.

4:4 Infants in Jerusalem during the siege did not have enough to drink or eat because their parents were looking out for their own needs first (cf. 2:11-12, 19).

These "infants are so weak from starvation that they no longer cry when hungry [cf. Job 29:10; Ps. 137:6; Ezek. 3:26]."¹

4:5 The rich people who were accustomed to eating delicacies had to try to survive by finding anything at all to eat in the streets. The royal and wealthy among the people resorted to ash heaps for food (cf. Job 2:8).

4:6 Jerusalem's sin and punishment were both greater than Sodom's. God overthrew Sodom quickly, whereas the siege of Jerusalem lasted 18 months.

"Jerusalem was more sinful not because of extreme sexual sin but because of extreme covenant unfaithfulness, though at times the two concepts merge."²

The last line ("no hands were turned toward [or wrung over] her") is unclear. It could mean that no one came to Jerusalem's aid during her siege. Or it could mean that no onlookers mourned over Jerusalem's siege. But it probably means that no human enemy subjected Sodom to a long siege, but a human army did lay a long siege on Jerusalem—which was worse.³

¹Berlin, p. 106.

²House, p. 440.

³Parry, p. 136.

2. The second description of siege conditions 4:7-11

4:7-8 Some of the residents had dedicated themselves to the Lord and were of the highest quality of people. Perhaps they were Nazirites (cf. Num. 6:1-21). However, even *they* had become victims of the siege, and had suffered terribly along with the ordinary citizens. Their fine complexions and healthy bodies had become black and shriveled.

"This chapter is one of the most graphic in the book in its description of the physical suffering of the people of Jerusalem, and what makes it especially vivid is the use of color. In fact, color is one of the striking features of the chapter: gold and scarlet (vv. 1, 2, 5), white, red, sapphire, black (vv. 7, 8). Bright colors represent the earlier conditions; as the famine progresses, the colors are erased from the picture and all that remains is dullness and blackness."¹

4:9 Some of the people had died in battle, but others had starved to death. Those who had died by the sword were more fortunate, because a swift death is better than a gradual one.

4:10 Previously compassionate women boiled their own children and ate them to sustain their lives during the rigors of the siege (cf. 2:20; Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:52-57; 2 Kings 6:25-29; Jer. 19:9).

"The sick irony is that the children were the means by which the women would survive into the future (by caring for them as they got older and by surviving them), and yet in order to survive the mothers must eat their own means of survival. One may assume that the mothers only ate the children who were already dead, but even so one could hardly imagine a more shocking and

¹Berlin, pp. 103-4.

sickening image to serve as a climax to the description of the famine in vv. 1-10."¹

"We look back and think how horrible this was but today many mothers are having abortions, actually murdering their babies. If we don't want a baby, we must take responsibility for our actions before a baby becomes a reality. God has made us capable of having babies and when one has been conceived, it is His intention for that child to come into the world. The moment the child is conceived, he is a *person* and to abort a pregnancy is murder of a human being."²

B. CAUSES OF THE SIEGE 4:11-20

Jeremiah now turned from the suffering to its source.

4:11 Yahweh had executed His wrath by punishing Jerusalem (cf. 1:12; 2:2-4, 6; 3:1). Like a fire, His anger burned among His people (2:3). Ironically, He consumed the city with fire. Even though the Babylonians were the instrumental cause of the destruction, the Lord was the efficient cause of it. The stone "foundations" of the city obviously could not be burned away; this may be hyperbole. Or it may be a reference to the human foundations of the city: its leading citizens.

4:12 The overthrow of Jerusalem had surprised the leaders and people of other nations. Invaders had forced their way into it in the past (cf. 1 Kings 14:25-28; 2 Kings 14:13-14; 2 Chron. 21:16-17), but the citizens had rebuilt and strengthened its defenses (2 Chron 32:2-5; 33:14). In Jeremiah's day it appeared impregnable, especially to the people of Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam. 5:6-8).

"Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C. exposed their false assurance and illustrates a theological truth of Scripture: Sinful and rebellious people, even if

¹Parry, pp. 137-38.

²McGee, 3:433.

outwardly associated with the covenant community and the promises of God, should not presume on His protection."¹

4:13 Jerusalem's overthrow had come because her religious leaders, represented by the priests and the false prophets, had perverted justice and forsaken the Lord's covenant. They had even put people to death who did not deserve it, including Jeremiah's contemporary: the prophet Uriah (Jer. 26:20-23).

4:14 Some of these spiritually blind leaders had apparently lost their physical eyesight during the siege and had to wander in the streets blind. They had shed innocent blood, and now blood stained their garments. Instead of being resources for the people under siege, they had become individuals to avoid because of their uncleanness.

4:15 Like lepers, they warned others to stay away from them (cf. Lev. 13:45-46). They wandered away from their own people, and even the pagans did not want them living among them (cf. Deut. 28:65-66). In Scripture, leprosy often illustrates the ravages of sin and death.

"As the false prophets and their followers had 'wandered' blind with infatuated and idolatrous crime in the city (vs. 14), so they must now 'wander' among the heathen in blind consternation with calamity."²

4:16 The "presence" of Yahweh had scattered these leaders because He had no regard for them. Consequently, other nations would show no respect for their *presence*. They had also failed to honor those who should have received honor in Judah, people like the priests and the elders of the people. The "presence of the LORD" had scattered them.

4:17 The Jerusalemites had looked for help to appear and save them, but none came either from man or from God. Their

¹Chisholm, p. 361.

²Jemieson, et al., p. 666.

expectation that another nation might come to their aid, such as Egypt, proved vain (cf. Jer. 34:21; 37:7).

- 4:18 "They" evidently refers to the Babylonians. This is the first reference to Israel's enemies in the book. The residents of Jerusalem could not even walk the streets of their city because the danger was so great during the siege. After the walls were breached, they knew that their end was near.
- 4:19 Judah's enemies swiftly pursued the Jews around the countryside as well, not allowing any of them to escape (cf. 2 Kings 25). They chased them wherever they sought to hide, on the mountains or in the wilderness, like an eagle pursuing its prey.
- 4:20 The enemy even captured the Davidic king, Zedekiah, who was as the very breath of life to the Judahites. The Judeans had evidently hoped to live under his authority in captivity, but now he was blind and in prison (2 Kings 25:4-7; Jer. 39:1-10; 52:7-11).

This section gives three causes for the siege: the sins of the priests and prophets (vv. 13-16), reliance on foreign alliances (vv. 17-19), and the capture of Zedekiah (v. 20).

C. HOPE FOLLOWING THE SIEGE 4:21-22

"4:21-22 comes right out of the blue! The tone of chapter 4 has been to focus on the absolutely dire situation in Jerusalem, and by 4:20 the audience is left with the distinct feeling that the end has come. Suddenly, from left field, comes what has the feel of a prophetic oracle proclaiming divine judgment on Edom for its treatment of Judah and an end to Judah's exile."¹

The author just quoted went on to suggest that the mention of "the LORD's anointed" (King Zedekiah) being "captured in the pits" (v. 19) may have recalled Jeremiah's release from a pit and his ultimate redemption (3:53-58) and given him hope.

¹Parry, p. 142.

4:21 The Edomites, related to the Judahites, were rejoicing over Judah's destruction (cf. Ps. 137:7; Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35), but the same fate was sure to overtake them (Deut. 30:7). They would have to drink the cup of Yahweh's judgment and would lose their self-control and self-respect (cf. Judah's condition in 1:8-9).

"After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, Nebuchadnezzar allotted the rural areas of Judah to the Edomites as a reward for their political neutrality, and as a recognition of the active help which they had provided for Chaldean military units during the final days of the campaign (cf. Ezk. 25:12-14; Ob. 11-14)."¹

The land of Uz, Job's country, was either a part of, near, or another name for Edom (cf. Job 1:1). This is the first and only time in the book that the writer identified a specific enemy of Jerusalem by name. Some scholars take "Edom" as a personification of Israel's enemy.²

4:22 Jerusalem's punishment had reached its end; the exile would not last forever. But God would still punish Edom for her sins. They would "swap places." Zion had drunk from God's cup of wrath, but now Edom would. Zion had been stripped bare, but now Edom would be. Zion's punishment had been completed, but Edom's was yet to come.³

Significantly, the last Hebrew word in this fourth acrostic poem is *tam*, which means "completed." Zion's prayers had been answered (cf. 1:21-22; 3:61-66).

"The closing note of certainty (v. 22a) as to Zion's bright future is most remarkable to the reader who had read this far in the book. It is but an interlude, however, a point of calm in the midst of

¹Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, pp. 237-38.

²E.g., Berlin, p. 113.

³Parry, pp. 143-44.

the storm. The fifth poem will find us once again in the midst of questions and doubts."¹

V. THE RESPONSE OF THE GODLY (THE FIFTH LAMENT) CH. 5

This poem, like the one in chapter 3, contains verses of only two lines each (or one line in the Hebrew text). It is the only non-acrostic chapter in the book, though like chapters 1, 2, and 4, it consists of 22 verses, having been built around the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The doleful *qinah* meter is also absent in this chapter, giving it a somewhat more positive tone. However, 45 words end in the Hebrew letter 'u' (in all verses except 19), which gives the chapter a rather mournful tone when read aloud in Hebrew.

The chapter is more of a prayer than a (communal) lament, though its content focuses on the pitiful condition of the Judahites because of Jerusalem's fall. One person speaks throughout.

"The absence of the usual prayer (see Lam. 1:20-22; 2:20-22; 3:58-66) at the end of Lamentations 4 is now supplied by the fifth chapter as a whole. It is this final touch that gives unity and completes the book for when all is said and done we rest our case for relief and healing from suffering when we commit it to God in prayer."²

"The best fruit of anyone's mourning is his praying to God."³

Jeremiah's prayer, which he voiced for his people, contains two petitions, namely: that God would remember the plight of His people (vv. 1-18), and that He would restore them to their promised covenant blessings (vv. 19-22; cf. Deut. 30:1-11).

"The chapter comprises a confession of sin [v. 16] and a recognition of the abiding sovereignty of God [v. 19]."⁴

¹Provan, p. 110.

²Kaiser, p. 109.

³Jensen, pp. 136-37.

⁴Harrison, *Jeremiah and ...*, p. 238.

A. A PLEA TO YAHWEH FOR REMEMBRANCE 5:1-18

5:1 Jeremiah called on Yahweh to remember the calamity that had befallen His people, and to consider the reproach in which they now lived (cf. 3:34-36). The humbled condition of the Judahites reflected poorly on the Lord, because the pagans would have concluded that He was unable to keep His people strong and free. Jeremiah implied that if Yahweh remembered His people, He would act to deliver them (cf. Exod. 2:24-25; 3:7-8).

This verse has been called "perhaps the most insistent prayer found in the Old Testament."¹ The speaker called on God to "remember," "look," and "see," the reproach of His people. Since God is fully aware of all things, these urgent pleas should be understood as requests that He act on behalf of His people.²

Verses 2 through 18 contain a list of complaints. Petitions in verses 1 and 21-22 frame this section, and so make it clear that the purpose of the list is to attract the Lord's interest so that He will act. Verses 2 through 10 describe economic conditions, verses 11 through 14 humiliations, and verses 15 through 18 summarize the community's sorrow.³

5:2 The Promised Land, Yahweh's inheritance to His people, had passed over to the control of non-Israelites (Jer. 40:10; 41:3). Their homes also had become the property of alien people (cf. Ezek. 35:10). These conditions represented a larger breakdown of Israelite society in general, since occupying the land was foundational to the nation's life.

"The book speaks of the brutal violence of the nations against the Jews, and it is sobering for Gentile Christians to read the text, not from the position of suffering-Israel, but in the role of the oppressive nations."⁴

¹Renkema, p. 589.

²Diane Bergant, *Lamentations*, p. 126.

³Parry, pp. 147-48.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 175.

"Christians live with the ever-present temptation to think that since the Messiah came God has abandoned the Jewish people in favour of the church. This, to my mind, represents a fundamentally unbiblical ecclesiology, but it has been the theology at the root of a lot of anti-Semitic attitudes and actions over the centuries."¹

5:3 Because the Lord no longer protected and provided for the people, they had become virtual orphans. They had lost their rights as well as their property. Jewish men had become defenseless, and Jewish mothers had become as vulnerable as widows having lost their protection. Social structures had broken down, and the people were vulnerable targets for exploitation.

5:4-5 The extent of their oppression was evident in their having to purchase water and firewood, commodities that were normally free. The Judahites' enemies were trying to squeeze the life out of them (cf. Josh. 10:24; Isa. 51:23). They had worn them out with their heavy demands and taxes (cf. Deut. 28:65-67; Ezek. 5:2, 12).

"The mention of **rest**, of course, reminds us, like the mention of 'inheritance' in v. 2, of the theological significance of what has happened. God had promised the Israelites that they *would* have **rest** in the promised land, especially rest from enemies (e.g. Dt. 12:10). It is also, one suspects, intended to remind God of this."²

5:6 Even to get enough food to live, the people had to appeal to Egypt and Assyria for help. This may refer to Judah's earlier alliances with these nations that proved futile (cf. Ezek. 16:26-28; 23:12, 21). Or perhaps the writer used Assyria as a surrogate for Babylonia (cf. Jer. 2:18). The point is that Judah

¹Ibid.

²Provan, p. 127.

could no longer provide for herself but had to beg for help from her Gentile enemies.

- 5:7 The present generation of Judeans was bearing the punishment for the sins that their fathers, who had long since died, had initiated. They had continued and increased the sins of their fathers. Jeremiah rejected the idea that God was punishing his generation solely because of the sins of former generations (Jer. 31:29-30). His contemporaries had brought the apostasy of earlier generations to its worst level, and now they were reaping its results.
- 5:8 Even slaves among the oppressors were dominating God's people, and there was no one to deliver them. Only the poorest of the Judahites remained in the land following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., but even the lowest classes of Chaldeans were dominating them.

"Israel, once a 'kingdom of priests' (Exod. 19:6), is become like Canaan, 'a servant of servants,' according to the curse (Gen. 9:25). The Chaldeans were designed to be 'servants' of Shem, being descended from Ham (Gen. 9:26). Now through the Jews' sin, their positions are reversed."¹

"Christian readers, often more interested in individual spirituality or ecclesial practices, regularly miss the significance of the political suffering in Lamentations. But it is clear that Jerusalem's *political* decimation is a major focus of the poetry."²

The poetry bears witness to the horror of political meltdown and, indirectly, to the goodness of political stability. It testifies to the real, concrete human suffering that follows social collapse.

"Lamentations also plays its role as a part of the wider biblical critique of empire. The biblical

¹Jamieson, et al., p. 667.

²Parry, p. 177.

literature, both Old and New Testament, is very positive about nations, but it is mostly very negative about empires."¹

5:9-10 It had become life-threatening for the Judahites even to acquire essential food, because their enemies tried to kill them when they traveled to obtain bread. Famine had resulted in fever, which had given the people's skin a scorched appearance.²

5:11-12 The enemy had raped the women and girls in Jerusalem and Judah. This was a common way for soldiers in the ancient world to humiliate their enemies, as well as to hurt them physically. It showed that the defeated could not even defend their women.³

Respected princes had experienced the most humiliating deaths, and the enemy gave no respect to Judah's elderly. Since Nebuchadnezzar evidently did not torture his victims (cf. Jer. 52:10-11, 24-27), it may be that the Chaldeans strung up the princes by their hands, or on stakes—after they had died—to dishonor them (cf. Deut. 21:22-23).⁴

5:13-14 Young men had to grind grain like animals or servant women (cf. Judg. 16:21), and small children buckled under the loads of firewood that the enemy forced them to carry. Elders no longer sat at the town gates dispensing wisdom and justice, and young men no longer played music, bringing joy and happiness into the people's lives. These were marks of the disappearance of peaceful and prosperous community living conditions.

5:15 Joy had left the hearts of the people, and they mourned so sadly that they could not bring themselves to dance. The eventual result of sin is the absence of joy.

¹Ibid.

²Ellison, p. 731.

³Parry, p. 151.

⁴Keil, 2:451.

- 5:16 A crown was a symbol of honor and glory. God's blessing and authority, also symbolized by a crown, had departed from the head of the nation. The crown may also allude to Israel's king. All these conditions marked the nation because it had sinned against Yahweh. She suffered under His judgment. But she acknowledged that these conditions were the consequences of her sins, and she bewailed her calamity: "Woe to us."
- 5:17-18 Divine judgment had demoralized and devastated the people. The climactic reason for grief was the desolation and abandonment of "Mount Zion." Wild foxes (or unclean jackals) prowled on the now-desolate holy place, which formerly had been the site of God's throne on earth, full of people, and the venue of many joyful celebrations. No wonder the Israelites' hearts were "faint" (sapped of vitality) and their eyes "dim" from weeping.

B. A PLEA TO YAHWEH FOR RESTORATION 5:19-22

The writer now turned from reviewing the plight of the people to consider the greatness of their God and to appeal to Him.

"In 5:19-20 the writer carefully chose his words to summarize the teaching of the entire book by using the split alphabet to convey it. Verse 19 embraces the first half of the alphabet by using the *aleph* word (... 'you') to start the first half of the verse, and the *kaph* word (... 'throne') to start the second half. This verse reiterates the theology of God's sovereignty expressed throughout the book. He had the right to do as He chooses, humans have no right to carp at what He does. Wisdom teaching grappled with this concept and God's speech at the end of the Book of Job, which does not really answer Job's many sometimes querulous questions, simply avers that the God of the whirlwind cannot be gainsaid (Job 38—41). Job must accept who God is without criticism. Then Job bowed to this very concept (42:1-6). Now the writer of Lamentations also bowed before the throne of God accepting the implications of such sovereignty. ...

"One reason there is no full acrostic in chapter 5 may be that the writer wanted the emphasis to fall on these two verses near the conclusion of the book. In so doing, he has adroitly drawn attention to the only hope for people in despair."¹

5:19 Jeremiah acknowledged the eternal sovereignty of Yahweh, and praised Israel's true king. Judah was not suffering because her God was inferior to the gods of Babylon, but because sovereign Yahweh had permitted, even orchestrated, her overthrow.

"The historical Kingdom of God in Israel may be interrupted; the nation may abide for many days without a mediatorial king; but there is nevertheless a Kingdom of God which continues without any hiatus or diminution."²

"Without a doubt verse 19 is the central point around which the circle of the content of this chapter was drawn ..."³

5:20 In view of God's sovereignty, the prophet could not understand why the Lord waited so long to show His people mercy and restore them. It seemed as though He had forgotten all about them (cf. v. 1).

Verses 21 and 22 amplify the creedal statement in verses 19 and 20.

5:21 Jeremiah prayed for Yahweh's restoration of the nation *to Himself*. Only His action would result in restoration. The prophet cried out for renewal of the nation to its former condition of strength and blessing. But primarily, he asked for a restored *relationship* with Yahweh.

"God is the only source of true revival."⁴

¹Heater, pp. 310-11.

²Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 24.

³Kaiser, p. 111.

⁴Price, p. 701.

5:22 The only reason the Lord might not restore Israel was *if* He had fully and permanently rejected His people because He was so angry with them. By mentioning this possibility at the very end of the book, Jeremiah led his readers to recall God's promises that He would *never* completely abandon His chosen people.

"When our great nation was founded during the period from 1775 to 1787, the following statement by Benjamin Franklin was still widely accepted: 'The longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of the truth that God governs in the affairs of men.' Unless a marked change takes place in the United States of America, it's doomed just as sure as was ancient Babylon."¹

Because this last verse of the book is so negative, many Hebrew manuscripts of Lamentations end by repeating verse 21 after verse 22. It also became customary, when the Jews read the book in synagogue worship, for them to repeat verse 21 at the end.² They also did this when they read other books that end on a negative note (i.e., Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and Malachi).

In view of God's promises to Israel, He would not abandon the nation completely. He would bless them in the future (cf. Lev. 26:44; Jer. 31:31-37; Rom. 11:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:13). Nevertheless the focus of this book is on the misery that sin produces, not the hope of future deliverance.

"The theological message of Lamentations may be summarized as follows: God's angry disciplinary judgment of His people, while severe and deserved, was not final."³

¹McGee, 3:434.

²Parry, p. 156.

³Chisholm, p. 359.

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