Notes on
Lamentations

2009 Edition

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Introduction

TITLE AND POSITION

The English title of this book comes from the Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a), which called it "Lamentations" (Heb. *qinoth*). The Hebrew Bible has the title "Ah, how" or " Alas" (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."[1]

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 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."[2]

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[1]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.

[2]The Book of Lamentations does not record a lament for Josiah, but this reference in Chronicles connects Jeremiah with written lamentations. E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 342; and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 1069, believed that the Septuagint and Vulgate translators erroneously deduced from this verse in Chronicles that Jeremiah wrote Lamentations.

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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. 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 eye-witness of Jerusalem's destruction must have written both books.[4]

Almost all Lamentations scholars believe the date of composition lay between 586 and 538 B.C., namely, during the Babylonian Captivity. 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.[5] 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.[6]

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.

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. The book would then have taught later generations the importance of covenant faithfulness and God's faithfulness.

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

[4]See Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 365-67; and Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering*, pp. 24-30, for refutations of arguments against Jeremiah's authorship.

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

[6]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.

> "The author of the Book of Lamentations was attempting to show the fulfillment of the curses presented in Deuteronomy 28."[7]

> "It [Lamentations] is a mute reminder that sin, in spite of all its allurement 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."[8]

> "This is one of the most tragic books in the Bible."[9]

STRUCTURE AND GENRE

The book consists of five laments (funeral or mourning songs, elegies). 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.[10] Yet the basic structure of the book is chiastic.

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

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.

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.

> "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

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[7]John 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.

[8]Charles R. Swindoll, *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*, "Introduction."

[9]Young, p. 365.

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

> Lamentations was merely employing two forms of the Hebrew alphabet, both of which were used in his time."[11]

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.[12] 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, perhaps because the writer could not express all that he wanted to say in this chapter in that form.[13]

> "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 respected literary tradition when he bewailed the destruction of Jerusalem and the desolation of Judah in 587 B.C."[14]

These laments became a part of Israel's sacred writings the same way many of the Psalms did.

THEOLOGY

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). These books also present sovereign Yahweh rather than man as the central figure in human history.

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.

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[11]Charles H. Dyer, "Lamentations," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, pp. 1210-11. Deviations of this sort also exist in other acrostic poems (cf. Ps. 25; 36; 37; 145).

[12]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.

[13]The writers evidently followed the alphabetical order only if they could fit their thoughts into that order. Content took precedence over an artificial arrangement. See 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.

[14]R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 195. 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 distinction is also evident in the communal and individual lament psalms.

> "It [the book] is a reminder that sin carries with it the consequences of sorrow, grief, misery, and pain."[15]

The lack of hope in these laments is due in part to the writer's viewing 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."[16]

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). Many expositors have seen foreshadows of Christ's passion in some of the dark sayings of Lamentations.

> "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."[17]

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

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[15]Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 645.
[16]Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of Jeremiah and Lamentations," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 359.
[17]Price, p. 696.

II. The divine punishment of Jerusalem (the second lament) ch. 2
   A. God's anger 2:1-10
   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 3:19-40
   C. Jeremiah's prayer 3:41-66
      1. A recollection of past sins 3:41-47
      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 4:7-11
   B. Causes of the siege 4:12-20
   C. Hope following the siege 4:21-22

V. The response of the godly (the fifth lament) ch. 5
   A. A plea for remembrance 5:1-18
   B. A plea for restoration 5:19-22

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."[18]

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.

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 bewailed the abandoned city of Jerusalem that had once been so glorious and independent. Sitting alone is sometimes a picture of deep sorrow and mourning (cf. 2:10; Ezra 9:3; Neh. 1:4). Now the city 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."[19]

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.

1:3 The prophet then expounded on the calamity (vv. 3-6). Judah had gone into exile because of 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

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[18]Dyer, "Lamentations," p. 1211.

[19]Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, pp. 17-18.

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.

1:4 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. Jerusalem'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.

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

> "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)."[20]

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

1:6 Once majestic, Jerusalem now sat humiliated. Her leaders, 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).

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* . . ."[21]

> "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]."[22]

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

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[20]Chisholm, p. 359.
[21]Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 662.
[22]Ellison, p. 704.

> "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."[23]

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 Jerusalem's enemy had gained control of her because she had not kept the temple holy. The Judahites had allowed pagan people to worship with them and so had diluted their allegiance to Yahweh.

1:11 The residents of the city did not have enough to eat even though they had given their prized possessions 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.

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."[24]

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 bird in His net. He had thoroughly desolated and demoralized her by removing all sustenance from her.

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.

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.

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[23]Harrison, *Jeremiah and* . . ., p. 209.
[24]Price, p. 697.

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.

1:18 The prophet 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."[25]

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

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

1:19 The city had called to its political allies (e.g., Egypt) and its leaders for help, but even the priests and elders had been selfishly taking care of themselves rather than guarding the citizens.

1:20 The city was greatly distressed because of the calamity that had come on it because of 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.

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[25]Schaeffer, p. 28.

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. 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.

> "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 is shown by the prominence repeatedly given to the wrath, rage, burning wrath, etc. (ver. 1 ff.)."[26]

A. GOD'S ANGER 2:1-10

> "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 . . ."[27]

2:1 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.[28]

2:2 He had devoured the cities of the Judahites without sparing them and had overpowered their strongholds. He humbled the kingdom of Judah and its princes.

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. Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29).

2:4 He had also attacked His people 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.

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[26]Keil, 2:381.

[27]Irving L. Jensen, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, p. 132.

[28]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.

2:5 Yahweh had become like an enemy to His people consuming and destroying them and causing mourning and moaning among them.

2:6 He tore down His temple like the temporary booths 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.

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.

2:8 The Lord also destroyed Jerusalem's walls and broke down her defenses.

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."[29]

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 leaders of the nation as well as its walls.

B. JEREMIAH'S GRIEF 2:11-19

This section contains five pictures of Jerusalem's condition.[30]

2:11-12 Jeremiah had exhausted his capacity for weeping and sorrowing over the destruction of his people; he felt drained emotionally. He 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.

2:13 Jeremiah struggled to find adequate words to comfort his people because their ruin had been so devastating. Jerusalem was a place of no comfort.

2:14 The false prophets had misled the people (cf. 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. Jerusalem was a place of perverted leadership.

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[29]Keil, 2:391.

[30]Dyer, "Lamentations," pp. 1215-16.

2:15-17 Passersby expressed their amazement at Jerusalem's great destruction. They could hardly believe that it had been such a beautiful and happy place. Judah's enemies rejoiced to see the evidence of her fall. They took pride in seeing her destruction. Jerusalem's destruction was the fulfillment of the destruction that Yahweh had told His people might come long ago (cf. Lev. 26:14-46; Deut. 28:15-68). He was ultimately responsible for it. He had showed no mercy in judging but 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.

2:18-19 Judah's enemies called on the city to mourn perpetually because of the destruction that God had brought on her. The Jerusalemites should cry out to God and ask Him to spare their children who were dying of starvation. Jerusalem was a place of ceaseless wailing.

C. JERUSALEM'S PLEA 2:20-22

This last pericope is another prayer to the Lord (cf. 1:20-22).

2:20 Jeremiah responded to this call to prayer 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?

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. No one had escaped Yahweh's anger, not even those whom the city had produced, when the Babylonian enemy annihilated them.

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 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 in that the prophet opened up and let the reader into his heart and mind.

> "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)."[31]

Faithful servants of the Lord of all ages can identify with many of the prophet's sentiments expressed here.

> "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."[32]

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."[33]

> "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."[34]

A. JEREMIAH'S SORROWS 3:1-18

3:1 Jeremiah 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).

> "The two preceding poems ended with sorrowful complaint. This third poem begins with the complaint of a man over grievous personal suffering."[35]

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 He had judged Jerusalem, and Jeremiah suffered along with the people.

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. 1:13-14; 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.

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[31]Jamieson, et al., p. 664.
[32]Dyer, "Lamentations," p. 1216.
[33]Price, p. 698.
[34]Harrison, *Jeremiah and* . . ., p. 223.
[35]Keil, 2:402-3.

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). 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.

3:12-13 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).

3:14-15 The prophet's contemporaries mocked and ridiculed him constantly. He had become full of bitter experiences, like poison, which the Lord had given him to drink (cf. 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."[36]

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."[37]

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

B. JEREMIAH'S HOPE 3:19-40

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

3:20-21 He himself remembered something that gave him hope.

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

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[36]Ellison, p. 718.

[37]Harrison, *Jeremiah and* . . ., p. 224.

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 the wilderness was one example of this.[38]

> "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."[39]

3:24 Jeremiah 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."[40]

3:25-26 Those who wait for the Lord and seek Him eventually experience His goodness. 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).

3:27 Likewise shouldering the heavy burden of God's revealed will in one's youth is a good thing.

> "Early discipline begets mature dependability."[41]

3:28 Such a person should bear his burden without complaining since God has placed it on him (cf. Ps. 39:2; 94:17).

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

> "The expression is derived from the Oriental custom of throwing oneself in the most reverential manner on the ground, and involves the idea of humble silence, because the mouth, placed in the dust, cannot speak."[42]

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[38]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 . . .").

[39]Chisholm, p. 362.

[40]Jamieson, et al., p. 664.

[41]Price, p. 699.

[42]Keil, 2:416.

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. 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)."[43]

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).

3:33 The Lord does not take pleasure in afflicting people or in bringing them grief.

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.

3:39-40 Jeremiah wondered why anyone could complain against God since all mortals are sinners and so deserve divine punishment. He counseled self-examination and returning to the Lord.

> "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)."[44]

C. JEREMIAH'S PRAYER 3:41-66

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.

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[43]Jamieson, et al., p. 664.

[44]Dyer, "Lamentations," p. 1218.

1. A recollection of past sins 3:41-47

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

3:42 He and his people had transgressed the covenant and had rebelled against the Lord, 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.

3:45-46 The Lord had made the Judahites as scum (Heb. *sehi*), namely, rejected as unfit for use.[45] 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 snared 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. Jer. 9:1; 14:17). He would do this until the Lord acknowledged the plight of His people by sending them some relief. What Jeremiah saw of the devastation of Jerusalem pained him greatly. Here "the daughters of my city" may refer to the dependent villages round about Jerusalem that the foe also took.[46]

3:52 The prophet's enemies had pursued him mercilessly, 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). He thought he would drown because of the water that engulfed him.

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.

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[45]This Hebrew word occurs only here in the Old Testament.

[46]Jamieson, et al., p. 665.

3:57-58 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).

> "No greater testimony can a sinner offer to God than to say, in thanksgiving, 'Thou hast redeemed my life' (3:58)."[47]

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.

> "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)."[48]

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.

3:64-65 Jeremiah believed that the Lord would pay his enemies back as they deserved (cf. Ps. 28:4; 2 Cor. 3:17). He would harden their hearts and so bring judgment on them.

3:66 The Lord would pursue them anywhere they might go and destroy them in His anger. The Lord did this to Jeremiah's enemies when the city fell to the Babylonians (cf. Jer. 39:4-7; 52:7-11, 24-27).

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."[49]

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[47]Jensen, p. 135.
[48]Harrison, *Jeremiah and* . . ., p. 231.
[49]Keil, 2:430-31.

A. CONDITIONS DURING THE SIEGE 4:1-11

This 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" introduction (cf. 1:1; 2:1). The gold and precious stones that had decorated the temple no longer served that function. 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."[50]

4:2 The enemy had regarded the citizens of Jerusalem, 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 replaced 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 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 nurse their young.

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).

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, probably because they were sick (cf. Job 2:8).

4:6 Jerusalem's sin, and her prolonged punishment, were greater than Sodom's, which God overthrew quickly. No one came to Jerusalem's aid during the siege.

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[50]Harrison, *Jeremiah and* . . ., p. 232.

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. However, even they had become victims of the siege and had suffered terribly along with the other ordinary citizens. Their fine complexions and healthy bodies had become black and shriveled.

4:9 Some 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; 2 Kings 6:25-29; Jer. 19:9).

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.

B. Causes of the siege 4:12-20

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 outwardly associated with the covenant community and the promises of God, should not presume on His protection."[51]

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.

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.

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[51]Chisholm, p. 361.

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."[52]

4:16 Yahweh had scattered these leaders because He had no regard for them. They had also failed to honor those who should have received honor in Judah, people like the priests and the elders of the people.

4:17 The Jerusalemites had looked for help to appear and save them, but none came either from man or from God. Their expectation that another nation might come to their aid, such as Egypt, proved vain (cf. Jer. 37:7).

4:18 Judah's allies proved to be her enemies. The residents of Jerusalem could not even walk the streets of their city because the danger was so great during the siege. 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. 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 (Jer. 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 The Edomites, kinsmen of 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.

> "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

[52]Jemieson, et al., p. 666.

> 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)."[53]

The land of Uz, Job's country, was either a part of, near, or another name for Edom (cf. Job 1:1).

4:22 Jerusalem's punishment had reached its end; the exile would not last forever. But God would yet punish Edom for her sins.

> "Chapter 4 does not end with a prayer, as do the preceding chapters, but it is followed by a prayer—all of chapter 5."[54]

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. It is the only non-acrostic chapter in the book, though like chapters 1, 2, and 4, it consists of 22 verses. The doleful *qinah* meter is also absent in this chapter giving it a somewhat more positive tone. However, 45 words end in *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 lament, though its content focuses on the pitiful condition of the Judahites because of Jerusalem's fall.

> "The best fruit of anyone's mourning is his praying to God."[55]

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]."[56]

A. A PLEA 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).

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[53]Harrison, *Jeremiah and* . . ., pp. 237-38.
[54]Jensen, p. 136.
[55]Ibid., pp. 136-37.
[56]Harrison, *Jeremiah and* . . ., p. 238.

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).

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.

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).

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). But probably the writer used Assyria as a surrogate for Babylonia (cf. Jer. 2:18). Judah could no longer provide for herself but had to beg 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."[57]

5:9-10 It had become life-threatening for the Judahites even to secure essential food because their enemies tried to kill them when they traveled to obtain bread. Famine had resulted in fever that had given the peoples' skin a scorched appearance.[58]

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[57]Jamieson, et al., p. 667.

[58]Ellison, p. 731.

5:11-12 The enemy had raped the women and girls in Jerusalem and Judah. 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 after they had died to dishonor them (cf. Deut. 21:22-23).[59]

5:13-14 Young men had to grind grain like animals (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.

5:16 God's blessing and authority, symbolized by a crown, had departed from the head of the nation. All these characteristics marked the nation because it had sinned against Yahweh. She suffered under His judgment.

5:17-18 Divine judgment had demoralized and devastated the people. Wild foxes or jackals prowled on now desolate Mount Zion, which formerly had been full of people and the site of many joyful celebrations.

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

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

> "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. . . .

[59]Keil, 2:451.

> "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."[60]

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

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.

> "God is the only source of true revival."[61]

5:22 The only reason the Lord might not restore Israel was that 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.[62]

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."[63]

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[60]Heater, pp. 310-11.

[61]Price, p. 701.

[62]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. They also did this when they read other books that end on a negative note (i.e., Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and Malachi).

[63]Chisholm, p. 359.

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