

Lamentations 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Lamentations chapter 2. How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud. He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel. He has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob. In his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah. He has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers. He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel. He has withdrawn from them his right hand in the face of the enemy.

He has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around. He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe, and he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes in the tent of the daughter of Zion. He has poured out his fury like fire. The Lord has become like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all its palaces. He has laid in ruins its strongholds, and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation.

He has laid waste his booth like a garden, laid in ruins his meeting place. The Lord has made Zion forget festival and sabbath, and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest. The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary. He has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces. They raised a clamor in the house of the Lord, as on the day of festival. The Lord determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter of Zion. He stretched out the measuring line. He did not restrain his hand from destroying. He caused rampart and wall to lament. They languished together.

Her gates have sunk into the ground. He has ruined and broken her bars. Her king and princes are among the nations. The law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the Lord. The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence. They have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth.

The young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground. My eyes are spent with weeping. My stomach churns. My bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, where is bread and wine, as they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mother's bosom. What can I say for you? To what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion?

[2 : 5 4] For your ruin is as vast as the sea. Who can heal you? Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions. They have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles that are false and misleading. All who pass along the way clap their hands at you.

They hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem. Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth? All your enemies rail against you. They hiss, they gnash their teeth. They cry, we have swallowed her. Ah, this is the day we longed for. Now we have it, we see it. The Lord has done what he purposed. He has carried out his word, which he commanded long ago. He has thrown down without pity. He has made the enemy rejoice over you and exalted the might of your foes. Their heart cried to the Lord, O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears stream down like a torrent day and night. Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite. Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watchers. Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord. Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint for hunger at the head of every street. Look, O Lord, and see, with whom have you dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?

In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old. My young women and my young men have fallen by the sword. You have killed them on the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity. You

summoned as if to a festival day my terrors on every side. And on the day of the anger of the Lord no one escaped or survived. Those whom I held and raised, my enemy destroyed. As in the case of chapter one, Lamentations chapter two follows an acrostic form, albeit not as pronounced as it will be in chapter three. While chapter two can stand alone as a lament poem, complete in itself, it also picks up many of the themes and various pieces of imagery from the preceding chapter. It focuses particularly upon the severity and totality of the Lord's judgment. Once again, the acrostic form invites us to think in terms of a complete account of a particular aspect of Jerusalem's downfall. In the preceding chapter, there were alternating voices.

The first was the voice of the narrator, and then there was the first person voice of Jerusalem. In this chapter, it begins with a third person description of Jerusalem in verses one to ten, then a first person speech speaking of Jerusalem in the third person, in verses eleven and twelve, and then addressing her directly in thirteen to nineteen, followed by a first person speech of Jerusalem herself in verses twenty to twenty-two. The strong literary structure of the chapter is seen even further in the chiasm or bookended structure that Johann Renkemer has noticed within it. Paul House mentions this in his commentary.

Verses one and twenty-two stress the day of the Lord's anger. Verses two and twenty-one mention God's lack of mercy. Verses three and twenty include consuming imagery. Verses four and nineteen use the phrase pour out. Verses five and eighteen are connected by the use of the word Lord or Adonai. Verses six and seventeen use the name Lord in the sense of Yahweh. Verses seven and sixteen mention the enemies of Israel. Verses eight and fifteen use the word daughter. Verses nine and fourteen mention prophets and visions. Verses ten and thirteen mention daughter Zion. And then verses eleven and twelve at the centre of the chiasm describe fainting in the street. The chapter begins by describing the devastating impact of the wrath of the Lord. The Lord brought the destruction of Jerusalem upon it, and the destruction is utter and complete. In three powerful verses it describes the annihilation of the glory of Zion. The Lord has not remembered his footstool. The footstool of the Lord is especially associated with the Ark of the Covenant, by extension the temple, and even further with Jerusalem itself.

[7 : 18] We see its connection with the Ark of the Covenant, and perhaps also with the temple, in 1 Chronicles chapter 28, verse 2. Then King David rose to his feet and said, Hear me, my brothers and my people.

I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building. The splendor of Israel rose up to heaven, but the Lord has cast it down to earth. The Lord has cast down, he has swallowed, he has broken down, he has brought down, he has cut down, he has withdrawn, he has burned, he has brought just about every form of destruction upon Jerusalem. And this is all an expression of the Lord's anger, his wrath, his fierce anger. The burning fury of the Lord has come upon Jerusalem, and she is now utterly dishonored. In verse 3, we read of the Lord withdrawing from Judah his right hand when their enemy fights against them. In verses 4 and 5, this withdrawn right hand, the hand that empowered and equipped them to fight against their foes, is not just withdrawn, it is now wielded in service of their enemies. If it weren't already clear enough from verses 1 to 3, which focused upon the destruction wrought by the Lord, in verses 4 to 5, it focuses upon the fact that the Lord himself has become the enemy of Jerusalem. He is not just indifferent and withdrawn from her, his anger burns against her, and he is warring against her through her enemies.

Verses 6 to 7 express the fact that the temple of the Lord has been an especial focus of the Lord's wrath. The Lord has obliterated his sanctuary, summoning the enemies of his people as if in some great festal day, in order that it might be utterly destroyed. In considering the reason for the Lord's destruction of his sanctuary, our mind might be drawn back to places like Isaiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 15 and 24 to 26.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations.

[9 : 35] I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. Therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself for my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

As Jeremiah had taught in his great temple prophecy back in chapter 7 of his book, Jerusalem had started to treat the temple as a sort of talisman, as if it were a den of robbers that they could retreat to to find security against pursuit of justice, rather than a place of true worship of the Lord and a house of prayer for all nations. As a result, they were like an occupying force within the Lord's house that he wanted to remove. In destroying his sanctuary, the Lord was granting himself relief from this abomination that was constantly before his face. The description of the destruction of the house of the Lord is similar to that found in Psalm 74 verses 4 to 8.

Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place. They set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees, and all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. They set your sanctuary on fire. They profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. They said to themselves, We will utterly subdue them. They burned all the meeting places of God in the land. Verses 8 to 9 make clear that this was a purposeful act of destruction. The Lord had determined to bring this ruin upon Jerusalem. He stretched out the measuring line. As we see in Amos chapter 7 verses 7 to 9, this is a preparation for an act of judgment. This is what he showed me. Behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall, built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, Amos, what do you see?

[11 : 52] And I said, A plumb line. Then the Lord said, Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. I will never again pass by them. The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. And I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. In these verses, the Lord is breaking down the buildings, the walls, the gates, and all of the defences of the city. As we move beyond the beginning of verse 9 and into verse 10, the utter demolition of Jerusalem is described not just as the demolition of a walled city, but also of the entirety of its polity. Her king and her princes are removed from the land, either in captivity in Babylon or as refugees among the nations. The law is no more. This presumably is associated particularly with the priests, who would have taught and upheld the law among the people.

The word of the prophets has been silenced. The Lord does not speak to them, and they are struck dumb. Not just the rulers, but the general population have been devastated. The elders, the people who would be looked to for wisdom and counsel, who would represent the tradition and the continuation of the past, they are in a state of mourning. Likewise, the young women, who were the group most associated with youth, beauty, the future, and joy. Their songs have been silenced, their dancing has stopped, and now they too sink down to the ground in the state of mourning. In verse 11, the voice switches to the first person. Perhaps this is the voice of Jeremiah the prophet. The sort of expressions that we read in these verses are very similar to those we find in places like Jeremiah chapter 8 verses 19 to 22.

Behold the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land. Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her? Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded. I mourn and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? The poet describes the slow death of infants in the city, fainting of hunger and then expiring on their mother's breasts. The voice of the lamenting poet now turns to address Jerusalem herself. He vainly struggles to try and think of some comparison by which he could take the measure of her suffering, but it is a futile quest. Words are completely insufficient to do justice to the extent of her shatteredness. Verse 14 describes the way that the false prophets played such a role in bringing about her ruin. We see these figures throughout the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah struggles trying to deal with these false prophets and their words of false peace by which they discouraged Jerusalem from any sort of real repentance, dulling their ears to the true voice of the Lord delivered through Jeremiah.

Some commentators have observed the similarity between the first half of verse 14 and Ezekiel chapter 13 verses 1 to 16. In verse 1 to 6 of that chapter we will get a sense of the similarities. The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are prophesying, and say to those who prophesy from their own hearts, Hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing. Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel. You have not gone up into the breaches, or built up a wall for the house of Israel, that it might stand in battle in the day of the Lord. They have seen false visions and lying divinations. They say, Declares the Lord, when the Lord has not sent them, and yet they expect him to fulfil their word. Some have argued on the basis of these resemblances that the book of Lamentations must be dated to a point after the book of Ezekiel. However, the prophecies of Ezekiel would have been circulating prior to the completion of the book, so it need not be dated later. The lamenting poet now describes the response of the enemies of Judah. They mock and hiss at the city. They gloat over her downfall, and take pride in their part in it. The poet makes clear that it is the Lord that has brought this fate upon Jerusalem. She must take it as the Lord's action, not just as something that her enemies have done to her. The appropriate response is described in verses 18 and 19, weeping in repentance and desolation, entreating the Lord to take some compassion upon her. The voice of Jerusalem re-enters in verses 20 to 22. She cries out to the Lord, declaring the horrors that she has seen. One of the most gruesome signs of judgment, one of the great curses upon Israel in the curses of the covenant in [16:43] Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 56 to 57, is women eating their own children. The most tender and refined woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because she is so delicate and tender, will begrudge to the husband she embraces, to her son and to her daughter, her afterbirth that comes out from between her feet, and her children whom she bears, because lacking everything she will eat them secretly, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you and your towns. In 2 Kings chapter 6, an example of this is described in the city of Samaria. Besides this, priests and prophets have been killed in the sanctuary of the Lord. Dead bodies lie littered throughout the city, victims of the day of the Lord's wrath. The day of the Lord's judgment is described again like a festival day that the Lord invited all these different nations to, in order that he might destroy his people, that he might visit upon them the destruction that they deserved. A question to consider. In verses 6 and 7, we see described the special fury that the Lord had against his sanctuary. The sin of Judah that had been paraded before the Lord in that place made it an especial abomination to him, and a particular object of his judgment. Where else in scripture do we see the judgment of the Lord being especially focused upon the worship of a sinful people?