

Lamentations 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Lamentations chapter 4. How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold is changed. The holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street. The precious sons of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold, how they are regarded as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands. Even jackals offer the breast, they nurse their young, but the daughter of my people has become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness. The tongue of the nursing infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst. The children beg for food, but no one gives to them. Those who once feasted on delicacies perish in the streets. Those who were brought up in purple embrace ash heaps, for the chastisement of the daughter of my people has been greater than the punishment of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, and no hands were wrung for her. Her princes were purer than snow, whiter than milk.

Their bodies were more ruddy than coral. The beauty of their form was like sapphire. Now their face is blacker than soot. They are not recognized in the streets. Their skin has shriveled on their bones.

It has become as dry as wood. Happier were the victims of the sword than the victims of hunger, who wasted away, pierced by lack of the fruits of the field. The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children. They became their food during the destruction of the daughter of my people.

The Lord gave full vent to his wrath. He poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations. The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem. This was for the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous.

They wandered, blind through the streets. They were so defiled with blood that no one was able to touch their garments. Away, unclean, people cried at them. Away, away, do not touch. So they became fugitives and wanderers. People said among the nations, They shall stay with us no longer.

[2 : 1 6] The Lord himself has scattered them. He will regard them no more. No honour was shown to the priests, no favour to the elders. Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help. In our watching we watched for a nation which could not save. They dogged our steps, so that we could not walk in our streets. Our end drew near. Our days were numbered, for our end had come. Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles in the heavens. They chased us on the mountains. They lay in wait for us in the wilderness.

The breath of our nostrils, the Lord's anointed, was captured in their pits, of whom we said, Under his shadow we shall live among the nations. Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz. But to you also the cup shall pass. You shall become drunk, and strip yourself bare. The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished.

He will keep you in exile no longer. But your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish. He will uncover your sins. Lamentations chapter 4 is the fourth poem describing Jerusalem's distress.

Chapter 3 moved us towards a point where Jerusalem could properly address the Lord in its grief. And this movement continues in chapter 4. Like chapters 1 and 2, it begins with the word how, with a dirge-like statement about the condition of the people.

Chapters 1 and 2 are poems with 66 lines, divided into 22 verses, each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3's acrostic pattern is even more pronounced still.

[3 : 56] Each successive set of three lines all begin with a particular letter of the alphabet, an alphabetical sequence. Like these other chapters, chapter 4 also has an acrostic pattern.

But here there are only two lines per verse, making 44 lines instead of 66, and only the first line of each verse follows the acrostic pattern. Within this chapter there are four principal speeches. Verses 1-10, 11-16, 17-20, and 21-22.

Once again there are different speakers, but it's not always clear who is the person speaking. Is the first person singular within the third person narration in verses 1-16 indicative of an individual member of the community speaking? Or is Jerusalem herself speaking?

Is the voice in verses 11-16 the voice of someone in the community, or of a more detached narrator? Some clues to answering these questions can be discovered in comparable passages elsewhere in the book.

The chapter begins by speaking of the way that the glory of Jerusalem had become dimmed. Once pure gold, that gold has become tarnished. While gold would not be tarnished, this gold has decreased in its splendour. In addition, the holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street. What the holy stones are is not immediately obvious. Some have suggested a reference to the precious stones that are part of the garments of the high priest, and other precious stones associated with the temple. Perhaps a more natural interpretation would be as a reference to the stones of the temple itself. A further possibility that this is a reference to the people of Jerusalem is raised in part by the verse that follows. The precious sons of Zion might be related to the precious stones of Zion. They are now regarded as of little value, as earthen pots. Here we might recall Jeremiah's symbolic action in Jeremiah chapter 19 verses 1-11.

[5 : 52] Thus says the Lord, Go buy a potter's earthenware flask, and take some of the elders of the people, and some of the elders of the priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. You shall say, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place, that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.

Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter. And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air, and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at.

Everyone who passes by it will be horrified, and will hiss because of all its wounds. And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters. And everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbour in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. In the distress of the siege which led to extreme famine, the people became desperate and cruel as a result, no longer even showing maternal tenderness.

Mothers were not feeding their young, even abandoning them. Other women, as we see later in the chapter, would even eat their children. The example of the ostrich's lack of maternal care is also found in Job chapter 39, verses 13 to 16.

[8 : 07] The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are they the pinions and plumage of love? For she leaves her eggs to the earth, and lets them be warmed on the ground, forgetting that her foot may crush them, and that the wild beast may trample them.

She deals cruelly with her young, as if they were not hers. Once again, dying infants and starving children are presented as a particularly powerful image of the desperation of the city of Jerusalem and its people. In Lamentations chapter 2, verses 11 to 12, The languishing of those who are rich and powerful within the city is a further example of how far it has fallen.

Those who had once dined on the best food are begging in the streets. Those once dwelling in great palaces and dressed in the finest clothes are now in the ash heap. Verse 6 contrasts either the punishment of Jerusalem with that of Sodom, or its iniquity.

Most likely, its punishment. Sodom's judgment came suddenly. Jerusalem's was painfully drawn out, far preferable to be taken quickly than to suffer such a long and devastating judgment as that experienced by Jerusalem in the siege and the famine and the pestilence.

Verses 7 to 10 continue this description of the terrible condition that certain members of the city have fallen into. The group, described in verse 10, has been variously understood as young men, as Nazarites, or as princes. If they are Nazarites, the point is presumably that the most religiously devoted of the city are suffering so terribly. If it's the case of the princes, it's the juxtaposition between their earlier riches and their current lack, and if it is the young men, it is the demise of the handsome and hearty youths that is particularly in view. Starving due to the famine, their skin has changed colour, it's become shrunken and dry, and they are now tragically unrecognisable to people who once knew them. It might seem that they would have been far better off to have died suddenly by the sword than to suffer in such a grim fashion. Yet far more horrifying still are the lengths to which certain mothers have gone in eating their own children. This is one of the curses of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 and also in Deuteronomy chapter 28. In 2 Kings chapter 6, in the siege of Samaria, we see a historical example of this taking place. Verses 11 to 16 seem to introduce a different voice. Verses 1 to 10 is the voice of someone within the community. In these verses, the voice seems to be of someone slightly more detached. Verse 11 describes the cause of the city's downfall. The Lord gave full vent to his wrath, he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations. This is language that is found elsewhere in the book.

[11 : 12] Given its successful defence against Sennacherib in 701 BC, and also the way that it had rebelled against the Babylonians without yet having been destroyed, the surrounding nations might have believed that Jerusalem stood strong, that it would not be easily overcome. The cause of the destruction of Jerusalem here is particularly identified as the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests. It was on account of the sins of the religious leaders that the city was destroyed. The prophets had engaged in false prophecy, the priests had compromised the worship of the temple. However, here it is their shedding of the blood of the righteous that is particularly singled out.

One might think back to Jeremiah chapter 26, where Jeremiah is almost put to death, and in that chapter the prophet Uriah suffers just such a fate. Verse 14 describes a group that are wandering blind through the streets, defiled by blood. Is this a reference to the righteous?

It is more likely still a reference to the prophets and the priests. Defiled by the blood of their victims, they become bearers of uncleanness, that have to be thrust out of society like leprous persons. While they seek sanctuary in other countries, they don't want them there either.

The Lord has scattered them because he has disregarded them, just as they disregarded him in the messengers that he sent to them. In its latter days, the kingdom of Judah had looked to Egypt for help, and yet, although there was a false dawn where it seemed that the Egyptians were going to come to their aid and the Babylonians left off the siege for a short period, there was no such help forthcoming. The Babylonians tightened the noose, and when they tried to escape, they were pursued and hunted down effectively. When the Davidic king Zedekiah, in whom they had placed their trust, tried to escape, he was successfully pursued. Members of his household were killed in front of his eyes, his eyes were removed, and he was taken to Babylon. The king here is described as the breath of our nostrils, the one who gave the people life. Without him, they are dead as a nation. He is also described as their shade, the one who protects them as they live among the nations. Now they are scattered among the nations. The imagery of the king as the one shading his people is found in Isaiah chapter 32 verses 1 to 2 as well. Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice.

Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. Without the shadow of their king over them, they are subject to the harsh and unrelenting heat of Babylon, beating down upon them. The chapter ends, however, with a turn in Jerusalem's condition. Edom, the descendants of the brother of Israel Esau, had taken advantage of Jerusalem at its lowest point, gloating over Judah as it was judged by the Lord.

[14 : 02] But its time would come too. The cup of the Lord's wrath would pass to it. The judgment about to come upon Edom is described in Obadiah verses 10 to 16. Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. But do not gloat over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune. Do not rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin. Do not boast in the day of distress. Do not enter the gate of my people in the day of their calamity. Do not gloat over his disaster in the day of his calamity. Do not loot his wealth in the day of his calamity. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives. Do not hand over his survivors in the day of distress.

For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you. Your deeds shall return on your own head. For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, so all the nations shall drink continually. They shall drink and swallow, and shall be as though they had never been. The final verse gives a note of relief. The punishment for daughter Zion's sins is accomplished. Edom's is still to come. The book of Joel ends on a similar note. In chapter 3 verses 19 to 21, Egypt shall become a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness, for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the Lord dwells in Zion.

A question to consider. Why is the judgment of Edom a sign of hope and restoration for Jerusalem?