

Lamentations 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Lamentations, Chapter 1. How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks, among all her lovers. She has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her. They have become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude. She dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place. Her pursuers have all overtaken her, in the midst of her distress. The roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival. All her gates are desolate, her priests groan, her virgins have been afflicted, and she herself suffers bitterly. Her foes have become the head, her enemies prosper, because the Lord has afflicted her, for the multitude of her transgressions. Her children have gone away, captives before the foe. From the daughter of Zion all her majesty has departed. Her princes have become like deer that find no pasture. They fled without strength before the pursuer.

Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering, all the precious things that were hers from days of old, when her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was none to help her. Her foes gloated over her. They mocked at her downfall. Jerusalem sinned grievously. Therefore she became filthy. All who honoured her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness. She herself groans, and turns her face away. Her uncleanness was in her skirts.

She took no thought of her future. Therefore her fall is terrible. She has no comforter. O Lord, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed. The enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things. For she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. All her people groan as they search for bread.

They trade their treasures for food, to revive their strength. Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see. If there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. From on high he sent fire. Into my bones he made it descend. He spread a net for my feet.

He turned me back. He has left me stunned, faint all the day long. My transgressions were bound into a yoke. By his hand they were fastened together. They were set upon my neck. He caused my strength to fail. The Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand. The Lord rejected all my mighty men in my midst. He summoned an assembly against me, to crush my young men. The Lord has trodden, as in a winepress, the virgin daughter of Judah. For these things I weep. My eyes flow with tears. For a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit. My children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed. Zion stretches out her hands, but there is none to comfort her. The Lord has commanded against Jacob that his neighbors should be his foes. Jerusalem has become a filthy thing among them.

[3 : 3 7] The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word. But hear all you peoples, and see my suffering. My young women and my young men have gone into captivity. I call to my lovers, but they deceived me. My priests and elders perished in the city, while they sought food to revive their strength.

Look, O Lord, for I am in distress. My stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. In the street the sword bereaves, in the house it is like death. They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble. They are glad that you have done it. You have brought the day you announced. Now let them be as I am. Let all their evil doing come before you, and deal with them, as you have dealt with me, because of all my transgressions.

For my groans are many, and my heart is faint. The book of Lamentations, as its name makes clear, is a series of laments. What do you say after the world has collapsed, after the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed by its enemies, as the whole theological framework of a regime is thrown into uncertainty. The book of Lamentations explores the impact, both theological and psychological, of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The book of Lamentations is written in a mixed poetic form, with various genres interwoven. We see elements of the dirge, for instance, the first line being one example of this, communal complaint, prayer, and other forms all bound together. Most notably, most of the book of Lamentations is written in an acrostic form, but with some variations. Chapter 1 follows a different alphabetical order than chapters 2 to 4, with the orders of the Hebrew letters Pe and Ayin reversed. Tighter acrostic structure can be seen in chapter 3, in which each line, and not just the first line in the verse, begins with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. There are other variations.

For instance, there are four lines instead of the typical three, in verse 7 of chapter 1, and in verse 19 of chapter 2. There are other examples of acrostic poetry in scripture. Psalm 119 is perhaps the most famous, but other forms of acrostic poetry can be found elsewhere in the Psalms. In places like Psalms 111 and 112, the literary form invites the juxtaposition of statements between two successive psalms. Johann Renkemer makes the argument that there are connections to be observed across the acrostic poems of Lamentations as well. A further famous example of acrostic poetry in scripture is found in Proverbs chapter 31, the concluding passage of the book that concerns the virtuous woman.

Such a form might have been chosen as an aid to memory. It's also a way of conveying a sense of completeness. The acrostic poetry of Lamentations covers the sorrows of Jerusalem from A to Z.

[6 : 39] Within the poetry of Lamentations, lines usually have two unequal segments, with the first one word longer than the second. William Shea has gone to the point of arguing that the 3-2 structure of the poetic lines structures the book as a whole on a chapter level. If this is the case, it might help to explain why chapter 5, although having 22 verses, as we would expect from an acrostic poem in Hebrew, is not actually ordered alphabetically. If Shea is right, and his argument is a promising one, then it goes beyond merely supporting the unity of the book to suggesting that this unity is a highly structured and purposive one which will reward close attention. The genre of the city lament, as we see in Lamentations, is not exclusive to scripture in the ancient Near East. There are other instances of such poetry across a vast period of time. Within the Hebrew canon, this book is part of the writings, and more specifically one of the five scrolls, along with Song of Songs, Ruth,

Ecclesiastes and Esther, all books that are associated with particular feasts or fasts. Lamentations, unsurprisingly, is associated with Tisha B'Av, a fast commemorating various calamities to befall the Jewish nation, from the people's failure to enter into the promised land onwards. Despite its position in the Hebrew canon, authorship has traditionally been attributed to Jeremiah, but this is by no means certain, nor does scripture demand such an attribution. There are various arguments in favour. First of all, Jeremiah is associated with laments. In 2 Chronicles, chapter 35, verse 25, Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a rule in Israel. Behold, they are written in the laments. There is also similar material to this in the book of Jeremiah. We might think here of Jeremiah's complaints or confessions. Jeremiah was also on the scene after the destruction of Jerusalem, so he would have been well situated to write such a book. His theology is similar to that of the book of Lamentations. He uses similar figures of speech, and as S.R. Driver notes, there are several examples of shared phrases. There are, however, arguments that push in the other direction. There is unique vocabulary in the book of Lamentations that's not found in the entirety of the book of Jeremiah.

The acrostic style is not something that Jeremiah uses elsewhere. Indeed, some have doubted that Lamentations itself is the work of a single author. Chapters 3 and 5, in particular, have features that might set them apart from the other chapters. Others have argued that Lamentations draws at certain points upon the book of Ezekiel, which, as it post-dates Jeremiah's presumed death, would rule out Jeremiah's authorship. However, it's possible that even if Ezekiel was an influence, that that influence came prior to the completion of the book of Ezekiel as we have it in the canon. Furthermore, if we look in the book of Jeremiah, we find several examples of funeral laments, such as those in the book of Lamentations. Wherever we come down on these questions, no claim of scripture itself is at stake here. Nevertheless, it's not unreasonable to believe that Jeremiah himself was the author, or even someone close to Jeremiah. Perhaps at the least, we would expect that someone like Jeremiah was the author. The first half of chapter 1 gives a more third-person account of Jerusalem's desolation, which switches to a first-person account from Jerusalem herself in the second half. A common theme throughout is Jerusalem's lack of comfort. Wherever she looks, there is no one to comfort her. There's also the frequent appearance of the term *all* with reference to various things, representing the utterness and totality of Jerusalem's devastation. The first verses express the series of reversals that Jerusalem has experienced. She was once full of people and now sits lonely. While she was once great among the nations round about, she is now like a widow, bereft and abandoned. She was once like a princess, but has now become a slave. She has been abandoned by all of the people that she once looked to and trusted in, her friends and her lovers. Her lovers here are probably the surrounding nations after whose gods she went and with whom she tried to form political alliances. We find similar expressions in places like Jeremiah chapter 22 verses 20 to 22.

Go up to Lebanon and cry out and lift up your voice in Bashan. Cry out from Abarim, for all your lovers are destroyed. I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, I will not listen. This has been your way from your youth, that you have not obeyed my voice. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity. Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil. Judah has been sent away into affliction and hard servitude in exile, and she is now scattered among the nations, dispersed among the peoples. Her attempts to escape were futile. We might here recall Zedekiah's short-lived attempt to escape from the Babylonians as the city fell to them. From the reversal suffered by Jerusalem in the first few verses, we move to the lack of life and the bereftness of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a site of pilgrimage, especially during the three pilgrimage feasts. Yet roads that would once have been full of people coming to the feast, and gates through which pilgrims would once have thronged, are now silent and empty. In the curses and the blessings of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28, one of the blessings of obedience was that Israel would become the head, and one of the curses was that their enemies would become the head, and that they would be the tail. Here Zion mourns that her enemies have become the head over her. She has been bereft of her children. They've been taken away as captives. Her majesty has departed, perhaps most notably the temple and the presence of the Lord within it, but also the sovereignty that Jerusalem used to enjoy, and the great and grand buildings, and the royal splendour, and the pomp that would have expressed it. All of this has been stripped from her. Jerusalem had to go on the run from her pursuers, but yet was easily overtaken as she lacked the strength. Jerusalem is painfully afflicted by the memories of the things that she once enjoyed. The Lord had blessed and enriched

Jerusalem in so many ways, and yet she had defied him and disregarded his word. Here the narrator talks about Jerusalem's defilement. On account of Jerusalem's sin, she had become unclean. The metaphor of nakedness here is used. Nakedness is associated with shame. It's also expressive of vulnerability, of stripping of finery, and also of disclosing the true character of something. All of these things befallen Zion, and as a result she is despised by everyone. Her uncleanness and her sin clings to her. It's in her skirts. Similar language is found in Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 34.

[13 : 35] Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the guiltless poor. You did not find them breaking in. As she is despised by her neighbours and people who once sought her out, she looks for help. There is no comforter. There is no one to come to her aid. She calls out to the Lord, yet he has turned his back upon her. In her desolate condition, Jerusalem is struggling to survive. The enemy has taken those things that were once precious to her, the treasures of the city, but also her children. The Gentile enemies of Jerusalem entered into the sanctuary itself and defiled it. According to Deuteronomy chapter 23, they were forbidden from entering, but yet they had done so nonetheless. In addition to the violation of the temple, Jerusalem experiences the shame and the indignity of falling to such a low status.

The family treasures are being pawned, and the children are being sold into slavery, merely to give her the bread that she needs to eat. Hers is a most pitiable condition. In verse 12, her own voice enters, expressing her devastation and her profound distress.

Her distress, she contends, is greater than that of any other. And in this second half of the chapter, it is clearly expressed that it is the Lord that has brought this upon her. Her condition is the result of the Lord's fierce anger. She describes the Lord sending fire into her bones, a metaphor that Jeremiah uses in his prophecy in chapter 20 verse 9. The Lord acts like someone trying to trap or snare her. He has turned into her enemy. Jeremiah talked about the yoke of the king of Babylon that would be placed upon Judah. Here, Jerusalem speaks of a yoke of her own sins that were formed by the Lord.

Jerusalem's pathetic and poignant situation is described in terms of a lack of comforters again, and the fact that the Lord, the one to whom she should have looked, has commanded this against her.

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