

Bible Book of the Month –

Lamentations

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When the Sinaitic Covenant was renewed on to the hosts of Israel, poised in the plains of Moab for the conquest of Canaan, the ancient promises of blessing were repeated; but so too were the curses that must follow upon rebellion against the covenant Lord. The warning was also cast in the form of a prophetic song (Deut. 32) which Moses taught Israel that it might be in their own mouths as God's witness against them in the latter days when many evils should befall them for their sins (cf. Deut. 31:19-21). Lamentations is the covenant congregation's antiphony to the Mosaic song of witness.

Israelite history had run true to the pattern foretold in that song. When Jeshurun waxed fat, he lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation and provoked God to jealousy with strange gods, until he hid his face in wrath. The ensuing destruction of Jerusalem and exile of her children occurred not as a single

stroke but, like Job's sufferings, as a succession of calamities. The years 605, 597, and 587 were all years of catastrophe, of siege and deportation. The beginning of the end might be traced to 608, the year king Josiah was slain in the valley of Megiddo, "and all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. And Jeremiah mourned for Josiah: and all the singing men and the singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations to this day, and made them an ordinance in Israel: and, behold, they are written in the lamentations" (II Chron. 35:24c, 25). Soon the passage of the unhappy years would be marked by the mournful fasts of the fourth month, and of the fifth and seventh and tenth months (cf. Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19) fasts memorializing major disasters in the protracted agony of Jerusalem's fall. This was the generation of lamentations in Israel. And amid the funeral wailing and doleful dirges of those dark days, the canonical Lamentations came into being.

Form-critical investigations have identified three literary types in Lamentations: the funeral dirge in chapters 1, 2, and 4; the individual lament in chapter 3; and the communal lament in chapter 5. For an example of another communal lament over a city, see the Sumerian lamentation composed in the first half of the second millennium B.C., a bewailing of the fall of Ur III to the Elamites and Subarians (cf. J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1950, pp. 455-463). Among various interesting parallels to the biblical Lamentations is the interpretation of the destruction of Ur due to divine abandonment.

Actually two or more of the designated literary types are interwoven in some chapters of Lamentations and all the types, even the individual lament of chapter 3, are expressive of the common tragedy of the whole covenant community. Such an employment of the individual form of lament and dirge was natural; for the eyewitnesses who was recreating the historic tragedy experienced it as a tragedy compounded of many personal tragedies – his own, his kinsmen’s, his neighbors.’

Spontaneous as is the emotion that pulses through these poems, they are a work of conscious art. That is evidenced in the strophic rhythm but especially in the alphabetic structure of the several laments. Taken together they constitute the most elaborate acrostic composition of the Old Testament. Each of the first four poems is a complete acrostic. The fifth poem contains 22 lines corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, although they do not begin with the successive letters of the alphabet. In chapter 3, not only the first but all three lines of each strophe begin with the appropriate letter of the alphabet (cf. Ps. 119). An odd detail is that, except in the first poem, the *ayin-pe* sequence is reversed.

For a summary of suggested explanations of the adoption of so artificial a form as the acrostic for the expression of such obviously spontaneous emotion, see Norman K. Gottwald’s stimulating *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London, 1954, pp. 23ff.). He concludes that while memorization may have been

one factor, the most significant “function of the acrostic was the encourage completeness in the expression of grief, the confession of sin and the instilling of hope” (p. 28) so that the laments might serve as an effective emotional-spiritual catharsis.

Whether or not the eyewitness-author was the prophet Jeremiah, we cannot be certain. In the Hebrew text the book does not explicitly claim Jeremianic authorship. Moreover, even though the sufferings of the individual who speaks in the first person as the representative of the nation in chapter 3 be regarded as reminiscent of the personal experiences of Jeremiah, a writer other than Jeremiah might have assumed that character as a literary device, similar to the speaking of the personified Zion in the first person (cf. e.g., 1:12ff.). However, earliest tradition, Jewish and Christian, is unanimously in support of Jeremianic authorship. The Septuagint translation is prefaced (though not in all extant nor probably in its earliest manuscripts) with the words: “And it came to pass, after Israel was led into captivity and Jerusalem laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said.” This tradition possibly existed still earlier in Hebrew manuscript, for the Septuagint statement seems to be a translation from Hebrew. The considerable measure of resemblance between Lamentations and Jeremiah’s prophecy in literary figure and phrase, in temper and tone, as well as in historiographical perspective lends strong support to the early tradition.

Modern literary criticism, however, with few exceptions rejects not only the theory of Jeremianic authorship but even the theory of a single author. The unity of the poems is judged to be rather that of common theme and common cultic function. The provenance of these poems is identified by some scholars as both Palestine and Babylonia, and the completion of the anthology has been dated up to two or three centuries after the exile of Judah. A thorough recent defence of a moderate form of this point of view was offered by Theophilus Meek in the introduction to Lamentations in *The Interpreter's Bible*. No single objection of Meek to the Jeremianic authorship is decisive nor is his case as a whole convincing. Meek finds evidence of an early tradition of non-Jeremianic authorship in the presence of Lamentations among the writings. He contends that if the book had been regarded as Jeremianic when the prophets were canonized, it would have been included in the second division of the canon. That contention rests on an erroneous approach to the whole question of the canon of Scripture. On the other hand, those who eventually adopted the three-fold arrangement of Old Testament books which is found in Hebrew editions possibly did base that division on the official theocratic status of the authors. But if so, we still could not be certain that they applied this primary criterion with thoroughgoing consistency (cf. Ps. 90).

Lamentations is one of those biblical songs occasioned by the fall of great cities. Some of these are taunt songs such as Isaiah prophetically uttered

over Babylon (Isa. 47) or Ezekiel over Tyre (Ezek. 27, 28) or the New Testament Apocalypse over the harlot “Babylon” (Rev. 18). But because the beginning of judgment is at the house of God, Lamentations must be heard in the covenant community, mourning the judgment of the city of God, before the taunt song, except prophetically, over the fallen city of the world.

The weeping of Lamentations over the captivity of Jerusalem is fraught with the mystery of the ways of him who takes no delight in the death of the wicked (cf. 3:33), yet has not elected to life even all those who frequent his sanctuary; of him who wept over the condemned Jerusalem which he would have gathered unto himself, the light of life, and they would not. Still the captivity of Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day was not yet the final catastrophe which Jesus lamented. The tears of Israel, carried captive in the sixth century B.C. from here paradise land of milk and honey, were more like the tears Adam and Eve might have shed as they were driven into exile out of the garden of God. The threatened curse had come; but there remained the prospect of restoration.

The redemptive omnipotence of the Lord is magnified when Israel exults over Pharaoh’s drowned hosts in the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15) and again at last when the Church, which has gotten the victory over the beast, stands by the sea of glass and sings the triumphant song of Moses and of the Lamb (Rev. 15:3). But the vindication of the Gospel as God’s power in putting enmity

between the elect and Satan and thereby in transforming them into steadfast friends of God is even more eloquently voiced in the doxology of a Job sung while he is still crushed in the serpents coils (Job 1:21, 2:10). Such is the praise which ascends from the covenant remnant to the heavenly Throne in Lamentations. At the nadir of theocratic history, while Satan is beguiling the nations into interpreting Jerusalem's captivity as proof of Yahweh's impotence and of the failure of his saving purposes, God raises a witness out of the mouth of the travailing remnant which was obliged to share in the judgment woes of faithless Jerusalem—a convincing witness to the redeeming and sanctifying efficacy of the Word and Spirit in their lives.

The victory of the Spirit of God in the hearts of his elect appears in Lamentations in the very fact that sorrow is expressed here not alone in soliloquy and rhetorical address to the passers-by, but ever anew in importunate prayer. Moreover, for the poet to interpret the judgment of the city of God as the judgment foretold in the covenant curse and to apprehend in the hour of judgment the hope of restoration presented in the word of covenant blessings was a triumph of faith and, therefore, of grace.

As for the fall of Jerusalem, Lamentations does not answer the Satanic attack on Yahweh's sovereignty by attempting to isolate the tragedy somehow from the will of God. The problem of theodicy may not be solved at the expense of theology. The lamenting remnant rather stands in faith under God's

revelation through the prophets and fundamentally through the Book of the Covenant, and they declare their “Amen” to Moses’ Song of Witness against Israel.

Gottwald’s conclusion that the situational key to the theology of Lamentations is found “in the tension between Deuteronomic faith and historical adversity” (op. cit., p. 53) represents a radical misinterpretation of Deuteronomy. Our lamenting poet saw no such tension but rather affirmed Jerusalem’s recent history to be a faithful execution of the terms, in particular the curses, of the Deuteronomic document of covenant renewal (cf. Deut. 27:14ff.; 28:15ff.). “The Lord hath done that which he had devised; he hath fulfilled his word that he had commanded in the days of old” (2:17). In every poem Israel’s covenant-breaking is confessed and Yahweh is recognized as himself the righteous author of Zion’s fierce affliction (see especially chap. 2). And, of course, the hope of renewed divine mercies, most graphically expressed in the anticipation of divine vengeance upon Israel’s gloating enemies (cf. e.g., 1:21, 22; 3:59ff.; 4:21ff.), is faith’s response to the promise of Israel’s restoration which was presented in the Deuteronomic Covenant as the prospect of the true Israel beyond the curse of Exile (cf. Deut. 30:1-10; 32:36, 43).

As incorporated into the canon of Scripture, Lamentations serves a purpose not unlike the Psalms. It is a pattern of piety for the devout; a call to repentance and prayer (cf. 3:40, 41). In particular, it instructs the children of

God in the nature of godly sorrowing before their heavenly Father. Here is the manner of mourning when God pours upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem the spirit of grace and of supplications and they look upon Him whom they have pierced and there is great mourning like that for Josiah in the valley of Megiddo (cf. Zech. 12:10, 11). Here is the tenor of prayer when evil days befall God's kingdom, when the bitter root of apostasy introduced by false prophets in revolt against the Word of Christ (cf. 2:14; 4:13) has produced a wild harvest of wormwood and gall.

The godly, while they need not suppress their soul's deepest groanings, are not to grieve with the abandon of those who have no hope. Even the acrostic form of the poems serves to enhance the expression of emotion which is under the discipline of faith—a faith which recognizes history as the orderly outworking of God's whole counsel from *Aleph* to *Taw*. The ebb and flow of emotion through the five poems is also instructive. The flood of lament is allowed to increase continually in the first two poems, but when in the climactic third chapter it threatens to become overwhelming, faith and hope take control drawing strength from the memory of the sovereign goodness of God: "I called upon thy name O Lord, out of the lowest dungeon ; thou heardest my voice...thou hast redeemed my life" (3:55, 58). Once and again in the last two laments by reason of the present evil waves of sorrow wash over the soul. But the force of the tempest is now clearly abated. The substance of things hoped

for, the evidence of things not yet seen has successfully assuaged the flood of despair. This godly lament, being like all true prayer faith's response to God's covenant Word, presently transcends the threatening storm with a confession of the certain realization of God's revealed purpose: "The punishment of thine iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion; he will no more carry thee away into captivity: he will visit thine iniquity, O daughter of Edom; he will discover thy sins" (4:22).

If Lamentations is like the Psalms in providing a model of prayer, it is like the book of Job in addressing itself to the righteous in their sufferings. Its closing note, while consistent with the composure achieved through confidence in the mercy of Israel's eternal Lord, reminds us that we do not prematurely escape the groaning and travail of this world (cf. 5:19-22). But like Job, Lamentations summons the people of God, whatever the providence and however long God seems to forget them, to abide in the way of the covenant which is the way of the obedience, patience, and hope of faith.