

STUDIES IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT

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by Nathan R. Schneider, Th.M.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Ironically, Lamentations is often overlooked in discussions of exile. However, many of the themes of theodicy, God's righteousness, God's faithfulness, God's wrath, prayer, imprecation, humiliation, hope, Israel, Jerusalem, and the nations found in Lamentations are also found in discussions of exile. The historical setting of the book argues that this is not coincidental: Lamentations discusses these realities because the exile has begun.... Jerusalem's destruction sets the ethos for the entire exilic period (see. Zech 7:1-3). Hence the diverse tensions in the book reflect the complexities of a life of suffering and hope in this epoch of redemptive history. Lamentations presents a succinct theology of exile, concentrating on how to respond and live in the God-ordained tensions generated by the fall of Jerusalem. The book takes the theology of exile and judgment in Jeremiah and shows how to experience it.

Abner Chou, *Lamentations*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

Lamentations

I. Introduction

A. Title

The Hebrew title for the book is taken from the opening word (1:1), *aycah*, an onomatopoeic term used often in written and verbal forms as an interjection of anguish and lament. It is a term which gives the force of "how" or "alas!" It appears often in funeral contexts where the speaker sings or cries out in anguish and desperation over the loss of a person.

Our English title is a derivative of the Greek *threnoi* and Latin *threni*, both translations of the Hebrew term *qinot*, meaning "lament." Both versions use this term as the title of the book. In all of cases, terms appropriately capture the tone of the book as a cry of anguish over the destruction of Jerusalem.

B. Authorship & Date

Interestingly enough, Lamentations is one of the few OT books to undergo any kind of intense critical challenges in terms of its unity. The vast majority of scholars across the theological spectrum observe the close unity of the book. A few scholars have suggested

that chapter 5 may be a later addition based on its uniqueness to the other four chapters. However, most view the work as a literary whole. Because of the explicit historical context of the book, the book clearly dates to sometime just after the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon and Judah's subsequent exile.

Jewish tradition has identified Jeremiah as the author of Lamentations. This is clearly attested in the introductory note of the LXX, which says, "And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem was made desolate, Jeremiah sat weeping and made this lamentation for Jerusalem and said..." To solidify this, they placed the book directly after the book of Jeremiah and before Ezekiel. This same association is made by other versions, such as the Aramaic Targums, the Syriac Peshitta, and Latin Vulgate, as well as the Babylonian Talmud.

The likelihood of Jeremianic authorship is substantiated by several points of evidence. Firstly, the prophet certainly matches the historical circumstance surrounding Lamentations. Both were eyewitnesses of the destruction of the city in 586 B.C. Both books share a similarity tone of grief and anguish (cf. Jer 8:18; 9:1; 15:18), as well as a similar "Deuteronomic perspective," meaning that both identify covenant disobedience as the justification for the divine wrath that came upon the city (Jer 17:1-13; Lam 1:18).¹ Both share similar metaphors, and there is significant overlap linguistically, including eleven nearly-identical phrases:

- Jerusalem's lovers do not comfort her (Lam 1:2, 8b-9; Jer 30:14; 13:22b, 26)
- Jerusalem's eyes and Jeremiah's eyes run with tears (Lam 1:16a; 2:11a; 18b; 3:48-49; Jer 9:1, 18b; 13:17b; 14:17)
- Jerusalem is broken (Lam 2:11, 13; 3:47-48; 4:10; Jer 6:14; 8:11, 21)
- Israel's priests and prophets have sinned (Lam 2:14; 4:13; Jer 2:8; 5:31; 14:13-16; 23:11)
- Israel's women eat their own children (Lam 2:20; 4:10; Jer 19:9)
- Israel has terrors all around her (Lam 2:22; Jer 6:25; 20:10)
- Both books speak of the writer's derision (Lam 3:13; Jer 20:7)
- Both books employ the terms "wordwood" and "wordwood and gall" (Lam 3:15; Jer 9:15; 23:15)
- Both books use the terms "fear and the snare" (Lam 3:47; Jer 48:43)
- Both books use the phrase "they hunt me" (Lam 3:52; Jer 16:16b)
- Both books use the term "the cup" (Lam 4:21; 5:16; Jer 13:18b; 25:15; 49:12)²

Despite all the evidence in support of Jeremianic authorship, there have been some challenges to the traditional view. Theologically, some have pointed to the different orienta-

¹ Abner Chou, *Lamentations*, EEC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

² S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: C. Scribner's, 1950), 462.

tions of the books as reason to question Jeremianic authorship. While the book of Jeremiah encouraged the people of Judah to accept the coming of Babylonian captivity as God's chastening on the nation (Jer 25:9), the book of Lamentations condemns the Babylonians (Lam 1:21-22). Literarily, it is pointed out that the book of Jeremiah is devoid of acrostics, whereas Lamentations utilizes three acrostic chapters (chs. 1, 2, 4) and a triple acrostic (ch. 3). Linguistically, there are also major differences between the books, despite their similarities. Some words in Lamentations never appear in the much longer book of Jeremiah, which seems strange, for it would be assumed that Jeremiah's prophecies would express much of Jeremiah's vocabulary.³

In the end, however, these objections seem of lesser weight than the evidence in favor of Jeremianic authorship. Numerous scholarly rebuttals have answered the objections listed above and reinforced the likelihood of Jeremianic authorship. Nevertheless, we must remember that the book never identifies its author, and so any position must be held with a level of humble generosity. Even conservative scholars agree that there is no theological reason for requiring Jeremianic authorship, or for the possibility that a contemporary of the prophet may have authored the book, having been heavily influenced by the ministry and writing of the prophet.⁴ Chou offers helpful concluding remarks to the discussion:

Although it is impossible to completely verify, the early tradition has withstood considerable evaluation. That being said, qualification of Jeremianic authorship may be in order. The author of Lamentations writes with the distress and detail of an eyewitness to the events of 587 B.C. He uses his literary knowledge to draw upon a diverse set of traditions and genres in composing a work that mourns the loss of the capital. This knowledge must have included intimate familiarity with the writing style and theology of Jeremiah. The suggestion that such an individual sounds like Jeremiah himself is quite reasonable and likely, although not certain. In any case, this discussion on authorship should remind the exegete to factor in the historical occasion of Jerusalem's fall as well as to be sensitive to the various literary factors (particularly the book of Jeremiah) when analyzing the text (Harrison, 198).⁵

C. *Historical Background*

As already observed, the historical context of the book of Lamentations is clearly the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. While this fact may appear straightforward, let us not assume we have a comprehensive understanding the true meaning and significance of this event. Only when we understand the theological, political, and religious significance of Jerusalem can we then put its destruction in a proper context.

Jerusalem was an ancient city, dating back to the time of the patriarchs. It was the capital of Melchizedek. This important priest-king had important interactions with Abram (Gen 14:17-24) that would prefigure the nature of the role of Davidic king in Israelite theology

³ Chou, *Lamentations*.

⁴ Mark F. Rooker, "Lamentations," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 556.

⁵ Chou, *Lamentations*.

(Ps 110:4). Abraham would later lead his own son Isaac up the slopes of a hill near Jerusalem to sacrifice him in a test of faithfulness (Gen 22:2).

Yet it was not until the giving of the Mosaic Covenant that Jerusalem would become central to Israel's national and theological identity. Moses told the people that after they settled in Canaan, God would choose a place where he would "demonstrate his exclusivity and centrality in Israel"⁶ and the world (Deut 12:13-32). As Chou observes, "Arguably, the foundations of Israel's history situate Jerusalem as a place of nation identity—a landmark of critical past interactions with God as well as a signal concerning his purposes for the nation as a whole."⁷

In addition to this, Jerusalem gained greater significance to Israel's people as history progressed. First and foremost, it became the city associated with the Davidic king (2 Sam 5:5-9; 1 Kgs 8:1), particularly after the establishment of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7), which made the city central to the fulfillment of those covenant promises. In other words, Jerusalem became eschatologically significant as the center of Israel's royal line and its central role in the world (Isa 2:2; 11:1-16).

Yet it also was central religiously to the nation. The construction of the temple and the subsequent presence of God in that place made Jerusalem the center of divine worship for the nation. Three times a year, the people gathered in that place to worship Yahweh. Chou explains, "While the offices of king and priests were kept separate (see 2 Chr 26:16-23), Jerusalem was unique in that it united the two."⁸

Thus, the sentiment that developed in Israel was that of Jerusalem as the "chosen city" (1Kgs 9:3; Psa 132:13), central to its religious, political, and eschatological hopes.

All of this solidifies a cultural perception about Jerusalem. The city stood at the focus of all their activities and was intertwined into God's promises to the nation, to its king, and to the world. The capital was the beacon of God's continued relationship (Psa 122:1-3), favor/election (1 Kgs 11:13), blessing (Psa 133:3), as well as an indication of hope for Israel and the world (Isa 11:1-16). Without much surprise, Israel encoded these sentiments in their worship (see Pss 48:1-14; 68:15-16; 84:4; 132:1-18).... Because of God's special treatment of Jerusalem, Israel concluded that the city was inviolable.⁹

This is what made its downfall so staggering. God had rescued the city in the past (2 Kgs 19:35-37). The people were sure that the city would never ultimately be lost, and thus assumption gave them the justification they needed to continue in their sins without any fear of divine reprisal. After the northern kingdom fell to Assyria, Judah began its slow, inexorable decline. Despite the efforts of a few, its kings continued to make unholy alliances with new, burgeoning empires in the hopes to safeguard the nation. Eventually, all

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

of the hopes imbedded in Jerusalem came crashing down when Babylon besieged the city and eventually sacked it.

Thus was Israel's confidence in the political framework associated with Jerusalem shattered. How could this be the city of salvation and strength (Pss 14:7; 53:6) when the nations could overcome and destroy it? How could this be the place of mediation and blessing (1 Kgs 8:12-9:5) when it had become a mockery before the nations (1 Kgs 9:7; Lam 2:16-17)? How could this be the symbol of a glorious king (1 Kgs 10:1-29) when the palace had been burned to the ground and its royalty humiliated for all to see (2 Kgs 25:11-22)? How could this be the symbol of a powerful kingdom (1 Kgs 10:1-29) when the nations had enslaved Israel in this very place?¹⁰

When the city fell, so did Israel's hopes and perceptions. The siege had turned the city into a waste, where survival meant women cannibalized their young (Lam 2:29). And the city's destruction was such a shock to the people that their loss can only be likened to the shock of losing a spouse (cf. Ezek 24:26). The people's confidence in God and his program was shattered. "Succinctly put, the fall of Jerusalem marked the collapse of everything for Israel—not only physical property, relationships, and national and political identity, but also the very core of Israel's convictions, aspirations, and hope.

What is to be done with it [Zion] in the light of 587 BC? Must it simply be given up as discredited, or does it encapsulate some truth that may survive? It is no mean question, for at the heart of Zion theology is about the election of Israel: David as the chosen king, Jerusalem and the temple as the chosen place and (by extension) Israel as the chosen nation. Does 587 BC mean that the doctrine of election, and hence the whole covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel, is at an end?¹¹

These are the questions and concerns posed by the book of Lamentations. It is a book that captures the physical loss as well as the shock of everything Jerusalem ever meant to the people of God.

II. Major Themes

Lamentations is a book that deals in tensions. It sets the nation's hopes against the nation's circumstances. It sets God's covenant faithfulness against God's wrath and judgment. In essence, it sets the present against the future. In this way, its principles, while historically different, are very much applicable to NT believers. Like Israel before us, we too live in a time between promise and fulfillment. We live in a time when the consequences of sin still effect our everyday lives. We, too, experience the heavy hand of God. Like Israel before, we are called to learn from God's discipline and rest in the fact that the present does not equate to the future.

Its themes are set within the framework of Israel's exile. Their removal from the land effectively ended their nationhood, and returned them to the very place (Babylon) where their an-

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ B. G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 77-78.

cient forefather Abram once left as God led him to the land where he would establish his descendants. The author and the reader are left struggling between the realities that God's judgment is painful, yet justified, and whether his wrath against Israel negated the fulfillment of his promises to them.

A. *The Judgment of Yahweh*

There is no doubt that the author of the book experiences great pains as he laments over Jerusalem's loss. But his pain, nevertheless, is brought about by the hand of God. God had become angry with Israel because of their sin (1:23; 2:1-4, 21-22; 3:43; 4:11). And the writer understood that what had happened was the justly deserved punishment for their covenant sins (1:5, 14; 2:17). Just as Moses had warned, their infidelity—if left unchecked and without repentance—would result in eventual exile (Lev 26; Deut 28). Thus, there is an acknowledgement that God was justified in his dealings with them (1:18, 22; 2:14; 3:40-42; 4:13, 22; 5:7). God had become their enemy (2:4-5), but only because Israel had first become an enemy to him.

B. *The Hope of Restoration*

Ultimately, however, God's judgment on the nation was not entirely punitive. It never was. While the covenant curses promised in Leviticus and Deuteronomy certainly expressed God's wrath and holiness, they were also designed to bring about repentance in the people. Thus the author holds out hope that while God had dealt a staggering blow to the nation, there was a singular hope that God's covenant love and loyalty had not changed. The author recognizes that Yahweh's loyal love never ceases and his compassion is unfailing. Thus his faithfulness is great, and this fueled the author's hope that God would ultimately do good to the nation if they would repent and seek him (3:19-26). Thus, the book ends with this tensions: "Restore us to You, O Yahweh, that we may be restored; Renew our days as of old, unless You have utterly rejected us and are exceedingly angry with us" (5:21-22).

Ultimately, Israel had seen God's faithfulness when he brought about the exile that he had promised. They understood that their sin had caused it. Their only hope was that Yahweh's faithfulness to punish would be met in kind with his faithfulness to forgive and restore, just as he had promised (Deut 30:1-6).

III. Purpose

Thus the purpose of the book can be summarized in the following statement: *Yahweh's servant lamented Jerusalem's great destruction caused by her sin and he gave a statement of repentance with a hope of restoration.*

IV. Literary Structure

The structure of Lamentations is somewhat interesting. The book seems to be a set of five poems all lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem. Therefore there does not seem to be any linear progression in thought. Like the psalms, the same themes appear throughout the book.

That being said, each chapter (i.e., poem) has its own unique features and focus. As addressed previously, chapters 1, 2, and 4 are each acrostic poems, with 22 verses beginning

with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. At the center of the book is chapter 3, the longest of the poems, with 66 verses, representing a triple acrostic. Only chapter 5 is without acrostic arrangement, yet its contents share much in common with the rest of the poems, including its 22-verse length. Some have thought that the purpose of the acrostics was to aid in memorization, but it very well may also have been employed as a means of conveying the concept of completeness. In kind, “The similar structure between the chaps. may also convey the notion that with the repetition the poems all reflect on the most tragic event in Israel’s history, the fall of Jerusalem.”¹²

Another interesting feature of the book is the use of personification throughout. Israel is personified as an abandoned woman (1:1-2). In other times, it is a persecuted man (3:1). And the city of Jerusalem is portrayed as a body which is sick (1:13; 3:4; cf. Isa 1:5-6).¹³ Rooker offers the following outline with each title summarizing the contents of the chapter:¹⁴

- I. Jerusalem is Devastated (ch. 1)
- II. The Reasons for God’s Wrath (ch. 2)
- III. The City Laments Its Devastation (ch. 3)
- IV. Zion’s Ancient Glory and Present Misery (ch. 4)
- V. Israel Calls for God’s Mercy (ch. 5)

Chou offers a more extensive outline:¹⁵

- I. God’s Wrath upon Jerusalem (1:1-22)
 - A. Stanza 1: Jerusalem’s Desolation: Fall and Exile (1:1-6)
 - B. Stanza 2: Jerusalem’s Covenant History: Reflection and Confession (1:7-11)
 - C. Stanza 3: Jerusalem Reaction: Suffering, Acknowledgement, and Petition (1:12-22)
- II. God’s Relationship with Jerusalem (2:1-22)
 - A. Stanza 1: God’s Disposition toward Jerusalem (2:1-10)
 - B. Stanza 2: Mourning over God’s Disposition (2:11-17)
 - C. Stanza 3: Petition over God’s Disposition (2:18-22)
- III. God’s Faithfulness toward His People (3:1-66)
 - A. Stanza 1: The Poet’s Reflections on Pain (3:1-18)
 - B. Stanza 2: The Poet’s Reflections on Hope (3:19-24)
 - C. Stanza 3: The Poet’s Reflections on Suffering (3:25-39)

¹² Rooker, “Lamentations,” 557.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 558.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 558-59.

¹⁵ Chou, *Lamentations*.

- D. Stanza 4: The Poet's Reflections on Confession (3:40-51)
 - E. Stanza 5: The Poet's Reflections on Petition (3:52-66)
- IV. God's Justice for His People (4:1-22)
- A. Stanza 1: The Poet's Confession of Relational Sin (4:1-10)
 - B. Stanza 2: The Poet's Confession of Relationship Judgment (4:11-16)
 - C. Stanza 3: The Poet's Confession of Recalcitrance in Sin (4:17-20)
- V. God's Remembrance of Jerusalem (5:1-22)
- A. Stanza 1: Plea for Remembrance in Light of Exile (5:1-18)
 - B. Stanza 2: Confidence in Restoration in Spite of Exile (5:19-22)