

*An Exegetical Commentary on*

# **Lamentations**

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**Originally published in the Bible Study Textbook Series, College Press, 1972.  
Revised Edition 2006**

## INTRODUCTION TO LAMENTATIONS

Lamentations is one of those Old Testament writings which has yet to receive its full share of recognition and appreciation by the Christian world. The reason for the neglect of this little book is not difficult to discover. In the popular view Lamentations is a somber and gloomy record of unrelieved grief as Jeremiah weeps over the ruins of Jerusalem. When viewed in this manner there is little about Lamentations that would attract the Bible student. However, the book is much more than a cheerless protest of the inequities of life. It is more than “a cloudburst of grief, a river of tears, a sea of sobs” as one writer has called it. This five-fold poem is really an affirmation of faith in the justice and goodness of God. The author has tasted the bitter dregs of pain and sorrow, of cruelty and ignominy, of frustration and loneliness and yet he dares to cling to a faith undaunted, a faith which triumphs over circumstances. The book endeavors to explain history and place calamities in proper perspective. When the true purpose of Lamentations is recognized this amazing little book has a great deal to contribute to a Christian understanding of war and natural catastrophes.

### TITLE AND POSITION

Like several other OT books Lamentations originally took its title from the first Hebrew word of the book. The book is called *Ekah* which is an exclamation expressing sorrow and sympathy. *Eka* in English may be translated “alas” or “how sad it is.” The same Hebrew word also introduces the second and fourth chs of the book. Later Jewish teachers referred to the book by another Hebrew title calling it *Qinoth* or “laments.” It is still known by this title in the Babylonian Talmud. The scholars who translated the Old Testament into Greek during the intertestamental period entitled the book *Threnoi*, the Greek word meaning “lamentations.” At still a later time in the Greek, Syriac and Latin versions of the Old Testament the longer title “The Lamentations of Jeremiah” was applied.

Though evidence is somewhat scanty it would seem that Lamentations was originally considered by the Jews as an appendix to the Book of Jeremiah. The Jewish historian Josephus at the end of the first Christian century stated that the Hebrew Bible consisted of twenty-two books — five books of law, thirteen books by prophets and four books of “songs and hymns.”<sup>1</sup> According to the Jewish method of counting, 1-2 Samuel were one book as were 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles. The twelve Minor Prophets were counted as one book and Ezra-Nehemiah were counted as a single book as well. Taking all this into account one would still have a total of twenty-four books instead of the twenty-two mentioned by Josephus. The only method of arriving at the figure twenty-two is to count Jeremiah-Lamentations as one book and Judges-Ruth as one. It is interesting that several of the early Church Fathers also speak of the twenty-two books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup>

At some point subsequent to the time that Josephus wrote (AD 90), several books were removed from the prophetic division of the canon and assigned to the third division which was called in the Hebrew the *Kethubhim* (“Writings”) and in the Greek the *Hagiography* (“Holy Writings”). The Book of Lamentations was at that time removed from its position as an appendix to the Book of Jeremiah and was counted as part of the third division. Lamentations was placed alongside of Ruth,

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<sup>1</sup>Josephus, *Against Apion* I. 8

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Melito of Sardis (A.D. 180), Origen (A.D. 250), Augustine (A.D. 420), and Jerome (A.D. 405).

Esther, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Collectively these five little books became known the *Megilloth*, the Five Rolls. Already as early as the writing of 2 Esdras (ca. AD 100) this switch in the position of Lamentations seems to have taken place. This is indicated by the fact that the author of 2 Esdras gave the total of books in the Hebrew Bible as twenty -four meaning that Ruth had been severed from Judges and Lamentations from Jeremiah.

## **BACKGROUND AND OCCASION**

The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC was without doubt the most significant event to transpire in the political and religious history of Israel since the Exodus from Egypt. Scarcely any room for doubt exists that it was this momentous event which, on the human side, precipitated the writing of the Book of Lamentations.

In retaliation against the rebellion of his vassal king Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege of Jerusalem for eighteen long months. Lamentations describes in the most vivid manner the terrible suffering to which the Jews were subjected during the siege. When the city finally was captured the Chaldean king ordered it completely demolished. To see their beloved sacred city go up in flames was a shocking—even stupefying—experience. In spite of the incessant preaching of the prophets who warned of this very thing, the Jews were totally unprepared for it. For over a hundred years since the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem in the days of King Hezekiah the popular notion had been that Jerusalem was inviolable and secure. Events had demonstrated the basic premise of their theology to be false. Added to the tremendous burden of their grief over what had befallen their nation was their feeling of having been utterly rejected by God.

## **THEME AND CONTENT**

Lamentations is a sad book. The basic theme of the book is a lament over the terrible woes which have befallen sinful Judah and the destruction of the Holy City and the Temple of God. The book consists of four dirges (chs. 1-4) and one prayer (ch. 5) which were written in those agonizing days following the capture and destruction of Jerusalem. As one reads the book he can sense the depths of despondency into which the people had fallen. In these poems the poet has attempted to capture the mood of the people. This was not particularly difficult for him to do since he seems to have been personally involved in their suffering. For the most part the poems contain descriptions of the plight of the people, their land and their sacred city. Here and there are confessions of sin, declarations of penitence, and appeals for divine aid.

Outlining the Book of Lamentations is somewhat difficult because the theme does not show significant variation from one ch to another. The outline used here has been adapted from that of C. Paul Gray.<sup>3</sup>

1. A Widowed City 1:1-22
2. A Broken People 2:1-22
3. A Suffering Prophet 3:1-66
4. A Ruined Kingdom 4:1-22
5. A Penitent Nation 5:1-22

## **FORM AND STRUCTURE**

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<sup>3</sup>“The Lamentations of Jeremiah,” in vol. IV of *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1966).

Lamentations is written entirely in poetic form. Hebrew poetry as a rule does not involve rhyme but rather is a poetry of thought. The second and third lines of each verse will repeat the thought of the first line in different words (synonymous parallelism) or develop further the thought of the first line (synthetic parallelism) or negate the thought of the first line (antithetic parallelism). The metrical structure used in the Book of Lamentations is known as the *Qinah* or lament rhythm. This is the meter most commonly used in the ancient Near East for chanting dirges over the dead or lamenting national calamities. In *Qinah* rhythm the second line of each verse is one stress shorter than the first line. As a rule in Lamentations the pattern is three stresses in the first line, two in the second, and three in the third line. This meter, practically obscured in English translation, becomes apparent as one reads the Hebrew text aloud.

The four dirges in the Book of Lamentations are in the form of alphabetic acrostics in which the author begins each verse with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 have twenty-two vv, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 contains sixty-six vv since three vv are assigned to each Hebrew letter. The following chart will illustrate more completely the structure of the book.

<b>STRUCTURE OF LAMENTATIONS</b>			
<i>Poem</i>	<i>Verses</i>	<i>Lines in Each Verse</i>	<i>Acrostic Pattern</i>
POEM I	22	Three lines in each verse; verse 7 has four lines	Each verse begins with a new letter.
POEM II	22	Three lines in each verse; verse 19 has four lines.	Each verse begins with a new letter. The sixteenth and seventeenth letters reversed.
POEM III	66	One line in each verse.	Each letter repeated at beginning of three successive lines or vv Sixteenth and seventeenth letters reversed.
POEM IV	22	Two lines in each verse.	Each verse begins with a new letter. Sixteenth and seventeenth letters reversed.
POEM V	22	Two lines in each verse.	No acrostic pattern

From the above chart it becomes obvious that the author of Lamentations was not a slave to form. He varied the number of lines in a verse and the number of vv which would be assigned to each Hebrew letter. In three of the poems he reversed the order of two Hebrew letters apparently in order to maintain his sequence of thought.

The author's reasons for utilizing the acrostic pattern in the first four poems is unclear. Some scholars feel that the acrostic served as a mnemonic device to aid the memory as these laments were publicly recited. It may be also that the author used this technique in order to give a sense of continuity and completeness to the expression of grief.<sup>4</sup> When one goes from a to z (or in the Hebrew, from *Aleph* to *Tav*) in expressing his grief he seems to have said all that can be said. The acrostic device is also used by other sacred writers.<sup>5</sup>

## **AUTHORSHIP AND DATE**

<sup>4</sup>Kuist, op. cit., 141.

<sup>5</sup>Psalms 25; 34; 35; 111; 112; 119; 145; Prov. 31:10-31.

The book of Lamentations does not expressly identify the author and therefore one must avoid being dogmatic on this point. However, there does seem to be rather substantial external and internal evidence that Jeremiah the prophet is to be credited with having written this work. The external evidence is as follows.

1. That Jeremiah the prophet did compose laments on at least one occasion is clearly affirmed by 2 Chr 35:25. While this verse does not refer to the Book of Lamentations, it does connect Jeremiah with the lamentation-type of literature. The book of Jeremiah itself indicates that Jeremiah was familiar with the vocabulary and the techniques of writing laments.

2. The earliest written source to ascribe the book to Jeremiah is the Greek version of Lamentations. This translation of Lamentations probably completed around 200 BC contains an introductory note which reads: "And it came to pass after Israel was carried away captive and

Jerusalem was made desolate that Jeremiah sat weeping, and he lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and he said . . ." The Latin Vulgate version of Lamentations carries essentially the same heading and the Arabic version reproduces this introductory note exactly.

3. The Targum or Aramaic paraphrase of Jonathan which dates to ca. 100 BC opens the Book of Lamentations with this line: "Jeremiah the prophet and chief priest said."

4. The Talmud, that vast reservoir of Jewish law and tradition, states: "Jeremiah wrote his book, Kings and Lamentations."<sup>6</sup>

5. All the ancient Church Fathers regarded Jeremiah as the author of Lamentations.

The internal evidence is equally strong in favor of the Jeremian authorship of Lamentations. Not even the most radical scholars can deny that the character and spirit of Jeremiah is the same as that of the author of Lamentations. Both books are full of sympathy for the people of Zion in their hour of judgment. Both books strongly emphasize the point that the destruction of Jerusalem was a punishment for sin. The author of Lamentations had precisely the same attitude toward false priests and prophets (4: 13-16) as did Jeremiah. In addition to these general points of agreement between Jeremiah and Lamentations, a number of similarities of thought and expression have been pointed out.<sup>7</sup>

Modern Old Testament critics deny that Jeremiah penned the poems that make up the Book of Lamentations. They assign this material to various anonymous authors some of whom lived as much as two hundred years after the fall of Jerusalem. Usually the second and fourth poems are said to be the oldest while the third is generally regarded by the critics as the latest. Pfeiffer dates the third poem to as late as the third pre-Christian century. The arguments which have been advanced to deny the traditional view that Jeremiah is the author of the book may be summarized as follows:

1. Lamentations contains a number of words not found in Jeremiah or found there only in a different form. Answer: Does this prove difference of authorship? The vocabulary of an author may change from one work to another depending upon the time, form and subject matter of the new composition.

2. The acrostic pattern employed in Lamentations is foreign to Jeremiah. Answer: While this observation is true, does it really prove anything regarding authorship? The form which a composition assumes is determined by the objective of the author. A versatile writer may utilize several different forms of composition during his career. But it should be noted that in the Book of

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<sup>6</sup>*Baba Bathra* 15a.

<sup>7</sup>Jer 8:21 & Lam 1:15; Jer 9:1, 18 & Lam 1:16; 2:11; Jer 30:14 & Lam 1:2; Jer 49:12 & Lam 4:21; Jer 30:14 & 2:4; Jer 38:6 & Lam 3:53, 54; Jer 18:6 & Lam 4:2; Jer 4:13 & Lam 4:19.

Jeremiah a predilection for alphabetical manipulation occurs in at least three passages. See comments on Jeremiah 25:26, 51:41 and 51:1.

3. The acrostic arrangements of the poems in the book vary; therefore the poems must be by different authors. Answer: Surely no one would demand that a modern poet never vary his form.

4. The author of Lamentations (4:17) expected help from Egypt; Jeremiah did not. Answer: Lamentations 4:17 makes no mention of Egypt. Furthermore the author of Lamentations frequently speaks for the nation and reflects the attitudes which they might have had.

5. The author of Lamentations (3:59-66) pictures the Chaldeans as wicked enemies deserving of divine judgment; Jeremiah considered them as instruments used of God for the chastisement of Judah. Answer: Jeremiah did in fact predict the destruction of Babylon (Jer 50-51). The idea that the Chaldeans were at the same time an agent of God and an enemy which must ultimately be destroyed are not mutually exclusive. Since the author of Lamentations attributes the Chaldean destruction of Jerusalem to God, he too must have viewed these foreigners as the agents of God.

6. The author of Lamentations was bewildered and perplexed over the destruction of Jerusalem while Jeremiah had been expecting and predicting that destruction for years. Answer: One has only to reread the personal prayers of Jeremiah to realize that the prophet had his share of bewilderment. Furthermore it must always be kept in mind that the author of Lamentations speaks for the entire community, not just for himself when he expresses shock and lack of comprehension over the destruction.

7. The author of Lamentations had a much higher estimate of king Zedekiah than did Jeremiah (Lam 4:19-22; Jer 24:8-10). Answer: There is no indication that Jeremiah had anything but respect for Zedekiah in his capacity as the head of the nation. Furthermore Lamentations 4:19-22 reflects the thinking of the people not the prophet who wrote the book.

The arguments against the traditional view that Jeremiah wrote the Book of Lamentations are singularly weak. Certainly the book seems to have been written by one who was an eyewitness of the destruction of Jerusalem. Who better than Jeremiah can be nominated as author of these poems which Gottwald<sup>8</sup> has declared are “without peer” among the collective laments of the ancient Near East?

## PURPOSE AND USE

Why was the Book of Lamentations written? Why was it included in the sacred canon? The book served a useful purpose in at least three different ways. Psychologically, Lamentations served the purpose of giving expression to the agony of a distraught people. Suffering men must give vent to their emotions in some way. Even though their grief was too deep for words the poet felt compelled to make an attempt to express the agony of his people through these sad but beautiful poems. Verbalization of grief and suffering, both physical and spiritual, has therapeutic value. Liturgically the poems of Lamentations served as the means by which the congregation of Israel could express sorrow over their national loss. Theologically the book served the purpose of helping the people of Judah maintain their faith in God in the midst of overwhelming disaster. Lamentations expresses the conviction that God has dealt justly with His people. The author desires that his people recognize the righteousness of God’s dealings with them and cast themselves upon the mercy of the Lord.

Lamentations is read in Jewish synagogues on the ninth of the month of Ab (which falls at the end of July or early August), a fast day which commemorates the destruction of the Temple.

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<sup>8</sup>Norman Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, (Chicago: Allenson, 1954), 111.

Roman Catholics read selections from the book during the last three days before Resurrection Sunday. Passages from Lamentations are also used in certain Protestant liturgies.

## REVIEW

1. The Book of Lamentations is known in Hebrew Bible by the name \_\_\_\_\_.
2. In the Septuagint (Greek Version) this book is called \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Lamentations seems to have originally been attached to \_\_\_\_\_.
4. In the modern Hebrew Bible Lamentations is found in the section called \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The event which precipitated the writing of Lamentations was \_\_\_\_\_ which occurred in \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Three types of Hebrew poetry are \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Only ch \_\_\_\_\_ is not written in acrostic pattern.
8. What is the purpose of the Book of Lamentations?
9. Why do some critics deny that Jeremiah wrote Lamentations?
10. Why did the author write four of the poems in Lamentations in the acrostic pattern?

## EXEGESIS OF LAMENTATIONS

### A WIDOWED CITY

#### 1:1-22

Chapter one of Lamentations has two major divisions. In vv 1-11 the prophet laments the present condition of Zion. Twice in this unit the prophet alludes to his own personal agony over the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. vv 9, 11). In vv 12-22 the city itself laments over its condition. Both units end in prayers which call upon God to take note of the plight of Zion and to execute vengeance upon the enemies of Zion. The entire ch is written in acrostic style, every fourth line beginning with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

### LAMENT OVER THE CITY

#### 1:1-11

The prophet's lament over the condition of Jerusalem moves through three stages. Verses 1-7 contain a lengthy description of the present condition of Jerusalem and of her former inhabitants. This description is followed by an explanation of the present condition in vv 8-9b. The lament closes with a prayer which calls upon God to take note of the plight of His people.

#### A. Description of the Present Condition (1:1-7):

##### 1. *Physical plight (1:1-3):*

- a. *Depopulation (1:1):* **How sad that the city, once filled with people, sits alone; that she who was great among the nations has become like a widow; that she who was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.** Jeremiah's lament over Jerusalem begins with the exclamation "how" or "how sad," a word frequently used

to begin a funeral dirge.<sup>9</sup> Jerusalem is personified as a widowed princess who sits alone in the night weeping over the loss of her husband and children. The loneliness of widowhood is emphasized in this lament. The once populous city is now empty. That city which had once enjoyed no small degree of notoriety among the nations is now obscure. The proud princess of provinces has been reduced to the state of abject poverty and slavery.

- b. *Desertion (1:2): She weeps bitterly by night, tears on her cheek; she has no one to comfort her among all her lovers; all her friends have dealt treacherously against her, becoming her enemies.* Every night the widowed city weeps over her plight but she has no one to wipe the tears from her cheek. Her “lovers” (political allies) and her “friends” (neighboring nations) have deserted her. Those who had once courted her assistance and who had so willingly offered themselves to her have now become her most bitter enemies.
  - c. *Explanation (1:3): Judah has gone captive out of affliction and great servitude; she dwells among the nations but finds no resting place; all her pursuers have overtaken her in the straits.* The children of Zion have been carried away captive by the Chaldeans and now dwell on foreign soil. Even though this deportation was in a sense a relief from “affliction” —the miseries of war, famine and pestilence—and “servitude”—the bitter bondage to cruel oppressors like Neco (2 Kgs 23:33) and Nebuchadnezzar—still the children of Zion found no real rest. Living among Gentiles they find themselves plagued by worry and doubt, depressed by homesickness, surrounded by idolatry, tormented by the realization that their God has inflicted this great punishment upon them because of their spiritual rebellion. From this captivity there is no escape. This is the point of the figurative expression “all her pursuers have overtaken her in the straits.” Narrow mountain passes make it almost impossible for a fugitive to escape from those who would pursue him. So also is escape only a remote possibility for those living in foreign exile.
2. *Spiritual plight (1:4-5):*
    - a. *Mourning (1:4): The roads to Zion mourn because no one comes to the appointed feasts; all her gates are desolate, her priests sigh continually, her maidens are sorrowful and she herself is in bitterness.* The roads leading to Zion are said to weep because pilgrims no longer travel them. The solemn festivals of the law of Moses were no longer observed for the city had been destroyed. The city gates, which formerly had bustled with business, now lay desolate. The priests mourn because they can no longer sing their beautiful hymns or play their instruments (Ps 68:24, 25) in the Temple.
    - b. *Humiliation (1:5): Her foes have become her head, her enemies are happy because the LORD has made her suffer because of the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone into captivity before the foe.* The enemies of Zion now have the upper hand. They mockingly rejoice over the misfortune which Jerusalem has experienced. Even little children have suffered at the hands of the cruel oppressor as they have been forced to walk that long, weary road to exile. Why does Zion suffer and her enemies prosper? Jerusalem’s troubles are due to the multitude of her transgressions. Zion’s God in righteous indignation has inflicted these penalties upon His people.

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<sup>9</sup>See Lamentations 2:1; 4:1; Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 48:17.

3. *Mental plight (1:6-7):*
  - a. *Flight (1:6): From the daughter of Zion all beauty has departed. Her princes have become like harts that cannot find a pasture; they have fled without strength before the pursuer.* The widowed daughter of Zion is ugly, weak and helpless. All her beauty—that which made her the envy of other nations—is gone. The princes of the nation are so destitute of strength that they are compared to wild harts which can find no pasture. Unable to withstand the pursuers the princes have fled.
  - b. *Memories (1:7): In the days of her affliction and wanderings Jerusalem remembers all the precious things which were hers from days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe and there was no one to help her; the foe watched, gloating over her demise.* The weakened and widowed condition of Jerusalem is aggravated by the bitter recollections of past privileges. She remembers the “precious things,” the gracious gifts which the Lord had bestowed upon her when she dwelt within her own land. Since Jerusalem had despised both the gifts and the Giver she was forced to enter into a period of affliction and wanderings. But no one commiserates with her in her agony. Her former friends, having become her foes, gloat over the demise and downfall of Zion. One of the miseries of sin in this world and hell in the next will be the constant recollection of the days when one enjoyed the blessings and graces of God.

**B. Explanation of the Present Condition of Zion (1:8-9a):**

1. *Shameful sin (1:8): Jerusalem sinned grievously and therefore she has become filthy; all who once honored her now despise her, having seen her nakedness; even she herself sighs and turns away.* Having hinted at the reason for Zion’s present misery in v 5, the poet now develops that theme. The root of Jerusalem’s trouble lay in the fact that she had sinned grievously against her God. Those who once honored Zion now have no respect for her. As God began to strip Zion of her splendor only filth could be seen, the filth of blatant sins and vices. An individual or nation that commits iniquity forfeits the respect of others. Sin results ultimately in contempt. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov 14:34). Even Zion herself moans and turns away in shame as her filthiness comes into public view.
2. *Thoughtless sin (1:9): Her uncleanness was in her skirts! She did not remember her end and so her fall is terrible, she has no one to comfort her.* When one begins to gain some insight into the true character of sin he is shocked and shamed. He cannot stand to face the gaze of others let alone the scrutiny of God. For a time Zion was able to conceal her filthiness beneath skirts of external prosperity. Her sin was an inward perversity. She was as morally unclean as a menstruous woman was ceremonially unclean under the law of Moses. Yet during the period of her prosperity she gave no thought to her latter end, i.e., the ultimate consequences of her evil ways. She lived only for the present and deceived herself into believing that God’s repeated threats of national destruction simply could not come to pass. This is what made her final fall so shocking, so inconceivable, so terrible. That plus the fact that she had no one to comfort her or extend sympathy to her. How much more bitter one’s grief and loss when no one else really cares!

**C. Prayer for Present Condition of Zion (1:9b-11):**

1. *Observe the affliction (1:9b): Behold, O LORD, my affliction, for the enemy has exalted himself.* Keenly feeling Judah's affliction as his own Jeremiah cries out in desperation to God. In narrative prayer he summarizes the present plight of Zion. The enemy has become haughty and overbearing.
2. *Observe the humiliation (1:10): The foe has spread forth his hand over her precious things. She has even seen the Gentiles entering her sanctuary, those whom You have forbidden to enter Your congregation.* All of the *precious things*, the gracious gifts that God had given Judah, had fallen into the hand of the enemy. Gentiles had even desecrated the sacred precincts of the Temple.
3. *Observe the dismay (1:11): All of her people are sighing as they seek bread; they trade their precious things for bread. Behold, O LORD, and observe! For I am dismayed.* The people of Jerusalem groveled for enough food to keep alive. They were forced to trade their most valuable possessions for their daily bread. As the spokesman for his people Jeremiah calls upon God to take note of the misery of His people and the dismay of His prophet.

### LAMENT BY THE CITY

1:12-22

In vv 12-22 the lonely, tearful widow takes up her lament. She appeals to passers-by (vv 12-16), to neighboring nations (vv 17-19) and to God (vv 20-22).

#### A. Appeal to Passers-by (1:12-16):

1. *Magnitude of Zion's suffering (1:12): Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see if there exists any sorrow comparable to that which has been brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted upon me in the day of his fierce anger.* Unable to bear any longer the weight of her misery Zion cries out in desperation to the caravaners and travelers who walk the busy trade routes near Jerusalem, "Is it nothing to you?" Do you not care what has happened to me? Have you no sympathy to offer me? Zion challenges the passers-by to name one city which they have observed in their wide travels whose sufferings are comparable to that of Jerusalem. Zion apparently feels that her suffering is unique and unparalleled. After all it is the Lord, Zion's God, who has administered the painful and fatal stroke in the day of His fierce anger.
2. *Yahweh's judgment on Zion (1:13-15):*
  - a. *Fire and net (1:13): From on high he has sent forth fire into my bones and it prevailed over them; He spread a net for my feet making me turn back; He has made me astonished with sorrow all the day.* The Lord has sent the fiery bolts of His wrath upon them from heaven. The very bones of their body seem to burn within them. Perhaps the city's misery is here being compared to a burning fever. The Lord has also spread nets for the feet of Zion causing them to fall into the hands of her enemies. Her sorrow is so great that she is astonished, i.e., has entered into a state of stupefaction.
  - b. *Yoke (1:14): The yoke of my transgression was bound by His hand; they were fastened together, placed upon my neck. He caused my strength to fail! The Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot resist.* God had taken all of their unforgiven sins and had woven them together in a yoke which was so heavy that the

strength of the nation was dissipated in trying to bear it. Weak and weary from trying to bear the yoke of accumulated sins Judah was easy prey for her enemies.

- c. **Winepress (1:15): *The Lord has despised all my mighty men in the midst of me; He convoked a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men. The Lord has trodden as a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah.*** At the appointed time the Lord had convoked a solemn assembly of foreign powers for the purpose of fighting against and destroying Jerusalem. Zion's mighty men as well as the flower of her youth were cast into the winepress of God's wrath. The once pure and undefiled virgin daughter who had been loved and treated so tenderly in the past now was trampled under foot by the Almighty.
3. **Zion's confusion (1:16): *Because of these things I weep, my eye, my eye flows with tears; for a comforter who can refresh my soul is far from me! My children are astonished because the enemy has prevailed.*** Because of these terrible blows Zion weeps with inconsolable sorrow. No one would even attempt to comfort her. Zion's children, her inhabitants, have been thrown into a state of complete shock because the Chaldean enemy has prevailed over them.

#### **B. Appeal to Neighboring Nations (1:17-19):**

1. **Abandoned by neighbors (1:17): *Zion spreads forth her hands, but there is none to comfort her. The LORD has given commandment concerning Jacob that his neighbors are to be his foes. Jerusalem has become a filthy thing among them.*** Zion turns in desperation to the neighboring nations. She spreads forth her hands in a gesture that is an appeal for help. But no aid is forthcoming from the neighboring peoples, the reason being that the Lord has commanded them to be hostile toward Jacob i.e., the nation of Judah. Jerusalem is now regarded by these neighbors as a filthy thing, literally, a menstruous woman.
2. **Abandoned by Yahweh (1:18): *Righteous is the LORD, for I have rebelled against His word! Hear now, all you peoples and behold my sorrow. My maidens and young men have gone into exile!*** Regaining some measure of composure Zion acknowledges that she has been justly punished for her sins against God. But the very thought that she has rebelled against the word of God causes Zion again to burst forth into uncontrollable sobbing. In prayer-like fashion she calls upon the neighboring peoples to hear her wail and behold her sorrow. For their benefit Zion reviews a few of the more agonizing details of her misery: The young people of Zion have been carried off into exile.
3. **Abandoned by allies (1:19): *I called unto my lovers, but they have deceived me. My priests and elders perished in the city while they sought food for themselves that they might preserve their life.*** Zion's lovers—the foreign nations and gods to whom she had turned—had not lived up to expectations. Zion's priests and elders are perishing because they cannot find enough food for themselves. Thus does Zion earnestly appeal to her neighbors for sympathy and help but there is no answer. Earthly friends often are unavailable just when they are needed most.

#### **C. Appeal to God (1:20-22):**

1. **Description of calamity (1:20): *Behold, O LORD, for I am in distress, my inward parts are troubled, my heart is turned within me because I have grievously rebelled. In the streets the sword has caused loss of life, in the house there is death.*** Finally the

weeping widow turns her face heavenward and presents a petition before the Lord. In the hearing of God she reviews her predicament and acknowledges her sin. Zion turns to the Lord with a contrite heart because she now realizes that there is no one else to whom she can turn. She makes no attempt to excuse her sin. She accepts her punishment as just.

2. *Mockery by foes (1:21): They hear that I sigh, that I have no comforter. All of my foes have heard of my misfortune; they rejoice that You have done it, have brought the day You announced. But they shall be like me.* The ruthless enemy had slain men in the streets and houses and then had rejoiced over the ruin which the Lord had sent upon Jerusalem. Yet Zion still has confidence in divine justice. One day that enemy will experience a fate similar to that of Jerusalem.
3. *Imprecation (1:22): Let all of their evil come before You! Deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions! For my sorrow is great and my heart is sick.* In a morally ordered universe no transgressor can go unpunished forever. The prayer “Let all their evil come before You” is a recognition of the fact that sin must be punished. Zion’s prayer is in harmony with what God had previously stated He would do to the nations (Isa 10:12-21; Hab 2:5-17; Jer 25:12-14). The execution of God’s wrath upon the enemies of Zion would in effect be an act of mercy on behalf of suffering Zion. Thus the appeal to God is not so much vindictive imprecation as a plea for mercy.

## REVIEW

1. What are the two major divisions of the first poem?
2. What is the significance of the word “how” which begins ch 1, 2 and 4?
3. How does memory play a part in the punishment for sin? See 1:7.
4. What vv in ch 1 indicate the poet’s awareness of the reason for Zion’s suffering?
5. What eternal lesson concerning the consequences of sin is found in 1:8?
6. What was the crowning act of Humiliation for Zion? 1:10.
7. To whom does Zion tearfully appeal for aid and comfort in vv 12-22?
8. Why is the yoke an appropriate symbol for sin? 1:4.
9. Did the poet feel that God had not dealt fairly with His people? Cite a verse which supports your answer.
10. Who are the “lovers” mentioned in this ch and how had they deceived Zion?
11. What is the spirit in which v 22 was written?

## CHAPTER TWO BROKEN PEOPLE 2:1-22

In content, form and theology ch 2 is a continuation of ch 1. Like ch 1, the second ch is also a national lament but the focus here is on the entire nation rather than just on the city of Jerusalem. The poem is in acrostic form which is almost identical to that used in the first ch except that the sixteenth and seventeenth letters of the Hebrew alphabet are transposed. Since this transposition does not interrupt the train of thought it must be viewed as intentional rather than accidental as suggested by some commentators. The same phenomenon occurs again in chs three and four.

Theologically this ch again emphasizes the fact that Judah's punishment came as a result of sin and that the punishment was entirely justified. In vv 1-10 the prophet describes the divine judgment upon his people. In vv 11-16 he expresses his sincere sympathy for his people in their sufferings. He exhorts them to present their case before God (vv 17-19) and sets the example for them by offering a model prayer on their behalf (vv 20-22).

## WHAT THE PROPHET SAW

2:1-10

The way the prophet emphasizes that the destruction of his people was an act of divine judgment is striking. In spite of the fact that God administered the stroke against Judah the prophet is not bitter. He knows that the judgment was proper and appropriate in view of the terrible sin of his countrymen. The detailed account of these vv points to the fact that the writer was an eyewitness to the catastrophe which he describes. The first ten vv of ch two should be read with the warning of Heb 10:31 constantly before the reader: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

### A. Judgment in General (2:1-6):

1. *Cloud and fall (2:1): How sad that the Lord in His anger has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the glory of Israel! He did not remember His footstool in the day of His anger.* Jeremiah almost exhausts the possibilities of human language in describing the burning wrath of a holy God against His apostate people. A great cloud of calamity settled down over the daughter of Zion in the day of His wrath. Like a star falling from the heavens so the glory of Israel fell to earth that day. God did not even spare His own footstool, the Temple or perhaps the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. It is possible that the phrases "daughter of Zion," "glory of Israel," and "His footstool" are to be regarded as progressive phrases designating the nation as a whole, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple or alternatively, Jerusalem, the Temple and the ark of the covenant.
2. *Devoured and defiled (2:2): The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the inhabitants of Jacob. He has cast down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah, bringing them to the ground. He defiled the kingdom and her princes.* The Lord has consumed the dwelling places and destroyed the strongholds of His people. He has caused the princes of the land to be profaned i.e., captured, mutilated, and slain by ungodly forces.
3. *Withdrawn support (2:3): He has cut off in His burning wrath all the horn of Israel. He has withdrawn His right hand in the face of the enemy. He has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob consuming all around.* He has cut off the horn (power) of Israel by withdrawing His powerful right hand of defense as the enemy approached. He has caused the territory of Jacob to be put to the torch.
4. *Bow and fire (2:4): He has bent his bow like an enemy, standing with His right hand like a foe. He has slain all that were pleasant to the eye. In the tents of the daughter of Zion he has poured out his wrath like fire.* After the capture of Jerusalem in 587 BC the city was burned to the ground (Jer 52:13). Judean resistance to the Chaldean onslaught of 587 BC was useless from the start because the real adversary was none other than God Himself. Through the instrumentality of Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers the divine archer

drew His bow against Jerusalem and slew “all that were pleasant to the eye” i.e., the finest young men of the Judean army. Even in the tent of the daughter of Zion (the Temple) He poured out His fiery wrath.

5. *Devouring and mourning (2:5): The Lord has become like an enemy, swallowing up Israel. He has swallowed up her palaces, destroyed his strongholds. He has caused mourning and lamentation to increase in the daughter of Judah.* It is none other than the Lord who has caused all the destruction and death and resulting lamentation in the land.
6. *Destruction and repudiation (2:6): He has torn down His tabernacle like that of a garden, destroying His meeting place. The LORD has caused solemn assembly and Sabbath to be forgotten in Zion. In His fierce indignation He has repudiated both king and priest.* He has not hesitated in destroying His tabernacle, His meeting place, any more than a gardener might destroy a watchman’s booth when the harvest season was over. The mockery of Judah’s festivals and sabbaths He has brought to an abrupt halt. Even the kings and priests, normally spared the indignities of war, have felt the blast of divine indignation and judgment.

#### **B. Judgment on Places (2:7-9a):**

1. *Sanctuary and palaces (2:7): The LORD has scorned His altar, disowned His sanctuary. He has given into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces. They made noise in the house of the LORD as on the day of an appointed feast.* How can the Lord allow the sacred city to be so humiliated? Because the Lord has scorned His altar and disowned His sanctuary. It takes more than outward ritual to prevent divine judgment. The Lord has turned the city over to the enemies of Judah. A shout has been heard in the precincts of the Temple—not the shout of joyous worshipers but of looting enemy soldiers.
2. *Walls (2:8): The LORD determined to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion. He stretched out the measuring line; He did not withdraw His hand from devouring. He has caused the rampart and wall to lament; they languish together.* The destruction of Jerusalem was no afterthought; it had been predetermined by God. The Lord had marked off the city for destruction with a measuring line. The outer defenses of the city, the rampart and wall, had fallen to the enemy after incessant bombardment.
3. *Gates (2:9): Her gates have sunk into the earth; He has destroyed and broken her bars.* The heavy gates of the city and the powerful beams which secured them during siege have been battered to the ground.

#### **C. Judgment on Populace (2:9b-10):**

1. *Kings and prophets (2:9b): Her king and her princes are among the nations where there is no law; even her prophets have not been able to find a vision from the LORD.* Zion’s king and princes are in exile among the heathen who know not the law of God. The prophets are without vision.
3. *Elders and maidens (2:10): The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence; they cast dust upon their heads having put on sackcloth. The maidens of Jerusalem have brought their heads down to the ground.* The sagacious elders of Jerusalem have no advice or counsel to offer. They sit silently with sackcloth about their

loins and dust upon their head as a sign of bitter mourning. The bright young maidens of Judah hang their heads in remorse.

## WHAT THE PROPHET FELT

2:11-16

In vv 1-10 the prophet described what he saw when Jerusalem fell in 587 BC. In vv 11-16 he describes what he felt as he looked upon the pathetic plight of his kinsmen.

### A. Grief over the Little Ones (2:11-12):

1. *He saw their plight (2:11): My eyes are spent with weeping, my inward parts are troubled, my heart is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies have fainted in the streets of the city.* The prophet's eyes shed tears till they could shed no more. His *inward parts* (lit., bowels) and *heart* (lit., liver) were overwhelmed by anguish. The tender-hearted prophet is particularly upset as he recalls the agonizing death of starvation to which the innocent babes and infants were subjected.
2. *He heard their cries (2:12): To their mothers they said, Where is the grain and wine? as they faint like wounded men in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out upon the bosom of their mothers.* He hears their pitiful cry for food which had to remain unanswered. He sees them dying, some in the streets where they have been abandoned by their despairing mothers, others clutching to the breasts of their mothers who are helpless to do anything to preserve the young life.

### B. Grief without Comfort (2:13-14):

1. *No comfort in comparisons (2:13): What shall I testify to you? To what shall I liken you in order to comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For vast as the sea is your destruction! Who shall heal you?* The prophet tries desperately to think of a word of instruction, edification or comfort which he can bring to those people who had to live through the horrible days of Jerusalem's fall. He tries to think of some like catastrophe with which to compare the present plight of his people. Search as he may he cannot find any tragedy equaling the destruction of the daughter of Zion. Her ruin is as unlimited and unfathomable as the ocean itself. The lament of the prophet reaches a climax with the question asked at the end of v 13, *Who shall heal you?* Certainly Zion's wound, by human standards, is incurable.
2. *No comfort in prophetic oracles (2:14): Your prophets have seen for you falsehood and foolishness; they have not exposed your iniquity in order to reverse your fortunes but have seen for you false and misleading oracles.* The prophets are certainly not able to help for they have never been able to correctly assess the situation in Zion. For a number of years they have actually encouraged the national hypocrisy and wickedness of their false and foolish visions. They have made no effort to expose iniquity, encourage repentance which would permit God to reverse the miserable condition of Zion. Their false and misleading oracles (lit., whitewash job) could not heal the wound of Zion.

### C. Grief over Gentile Mockery (2:15-16):

1. *Passers-by (2:15): All who pass by clap their hands at you. They hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying is this the city which was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?* Much less could the caravaners and travelers who passed along the busy highways do anything to aid Zion. They have actually joined in the mockery of the fallen city by contemptuously clapping their hands, hissing and wagging their heads. Having looked upon the city which had been renown for its beauty they jeer, “Is this the city which was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?”
2. *Enemies (2:16): All your enemies rail against you, hissing and gnashing their teeth. They have said, We have swallowed her up! Ah, this is the day we longed for; we have found it! We have seen it!* Still less would neighboring nations be able to heal the broken nation of Judah. They had actually been looking forward to the day when Jerusalem would fall and they would be able to swallow up the territory she once possessed. Who then can heal the wound of Zion?

### EXHORTATION TO THE PEOPLE

2:17-19

- A. Reason for their Plight (2:17): *The LORD has done what He planned. He has fulfilled His word which He decreed in days of old. He has torn down without pity, made the enemy rejoice over you and exalted the horn of your foes.*** In preparing to answer his own question, *who can heal you*, the prophet reminds the people of a basic fact. The destruction of Zion was not due to the power and cunning of Zion’s enemies but was in fact the fulfillment of threats made centuries earlier (cf. Dt 28:15ff). By disobeying the commandments of God the people had violated the terms of the covenant and thus had incurred the penalties for disobedience specified therein. This is the real reason Israel had been brought so low and the *horn* or strength of their enemies had been exalted.
- B. Appeal for Prayer (2:18-19):**
1. *Appeal for earnest petition (2:18): Their heart cried unto the Lord! O wall of the daughter of Zion! Let tears run down like a river both day and night! Give yourself no rest! Let not the pupils of your eyes cease!* Because the Lord is responsible for the destruction of Zion He alone can restore her fortunes. In bold personification the prophet calls upon the broken wall of Jerusalem to cry unto the Lord in supplication day and night. Without respite those walls should continue their pleadings with the Lord for reconstruction.
  2. *Appeal for continual petition (2:19): Arise! Cry in the night at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord! Lift up your hands unto Him for the sake of your children who faint for hunger at the head of every street.* The people must continue to pray right on through the night. The beginning of the three night watches, sunset, should find them still pouring out their heart like water before the Lord and lifting up their hands toward heaven in expectation of receiving divine blessing. If they become weary in the work of prayer they should remember the little children who are suffering immeasurably on every street of the ruined city.

Jeremiah makes no promises but his exhortation implies that God will hear the agonizing cry of His penitent people just as he heard their cry when they suffered during the Egyptian bondage (cf. Ex. 3:7).

## PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE

2:20-22

In vv 20-22 the prophet prays the prayer he has been urging the nation to pray and in so doing teaches them how to properly approach the throne of God. These vv remind one of Jeremiah 14:17-19. The prophet boldly presents all the cogent arguments of which he can think in his effort to influence God to aid the people of Judah.

**A. First Grounds of Appeal (2:20):** *Behold, O LORD, and consider to whom You have done this! Shall women eat their offspring, babes who are carried in the arms? Shall priest and prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?* First, the prophet asks God to consider that it is His own people who are suffering (cf. Ex 32:11-13). Divine judgment has caused the people of Judah to sink into the lowest kind of human behavior, cannibalism. Surely God will intervene when men are driven to the point of consuming one another! Priests and prophets who have been anointed to the service of the Lord are being slain in the sacred precincts of the Temple.

**B. Second Grounds of Appeal (2:21):** *On the ground in the streets lie the young and old. My maidens and young men have fallen by the sword. You have slain them in the day of Your anger, slaughtering without mercy.* Surely God will intervene when religious massacre is taking place! Young and old, male and female, lie dead on the streets of Jerusalem, slain by the sword of the divinely appointed enemy of Zion.

**C. Third Grounds of Appeal (2:22):** *You called, as in the days of a solemn assembly, my terrors round about. On the day of the anger of the LORD there was not one who escaped or survived. Those I carried in the arms and raised up my enemy has consumed.* Surely God will intervene when outrage is committed in public without regard to sex or age. The terrors of war—famine, sword and pestilence—have been summoned by God against Judah just as He might summon His worshipers to a festival. In that day of the Lord's anger no one escaped or survived. The enemy has even consumed the babes in arms!

So the prayer ends as it began, with a reference to the slaughter of the innocents. This rehearsal of Judah's tale of woe is an implied request for mercy and deliverance. The matter is left in the hands of the Lord in the firm belief that the Judge of all the earth will surely do what is right.

## REVIEW

1. Does this ch reflect a bitterness toward God because He has allowed and permitted the destruction of Zion?
2. In what sense was God responsible for the calamity of 587 BC? 2:1-10.
3. What is meant by the phrases *daughter of Zion*, *glory of Israel*, and *his footstool*? 2:1.
4. From what sources would Zion not find healing? 2:13-16.

5. What is the poet encouraging his people to do in vv 17-19?
6. What arguments does the prophet present in vv 20-22 to influence God to aid His distressed people?

## CHAPTER THREE SUFFERING PROPHET 3:1-66

Again in ch three the poet has adopted the acrostic style but in a slightly different form from that of the previous chs. In chs 1 and 2 only the first line of each stanza of three lines began with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In ch 3 all three lines of each stanza begin with the same Hebrew letter. Chapter 3 is actually the same length as chs 1 and 2 though the v numeration makes it appear longer. In the first two chs three lines of Hebrew v comprise one v of English text; in ch 3 each line of Hebrew text has been counted as one v of English text. Thus the vv of ch 3 are only one third as long as those of chs 1 and 2 and there are three times as many of them.

The major exegetical problem arising in ch 3 is whether this is an individual lament or whether the individual here is a personification of the nation. In favor of the individual interpretation of the ch is the fact that the speaker is called a man (vv 1, 27, 35, 39). Furthermore, some of the vv of this ch have an intensely personal tone (e.g., vv 14 and 53). On the other hand the shift from “I” to “we” in vv 22 and 40-47 suggests that the first person singular is but a stylistic device which the poet has used to speak of the suffering of the entire nation. According to this view Jeremiah is here speaking as an individual member of the nation who has become identified with his people in the midst of their affliction. Their trouble, suffering and grief are his as well. In truth the ch seems to contain both the individual “I” and the collective “I” and it is not always easy to ascertain which use of the first person is intended. In the comments which follow the shifts in the usage of the first person will be noted where possible.

In relationship to the suffering prophet one can see in this ch (1) his cry of desperation (vv 1-18); (2) his confession of faith (vv 19-39); (3) his appeal for repentance (vv 40-47); (4) his personal suffering (vv 48-54); and (5) his prayer for deliverance (vv 55-66).

### HIS CRY OF DESPERATION 3:1-18

- A. **Theme (3:1): *I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath.*** The opening v sets the theme for ch 3. The poet identifies himself as an individual who has experienced in his own life what the nation has experienced. *I am the man who has seen affliction* is a general statement of his misery. *By the rod of His wrath* can refer only to God although God is not specifically mentioned until v 18. Having identified himself and set forth the basic thesis of the ch the prophet begins to develop his theme in a series of brilliant similes and metaphors.
- B. **Metaphors for Suffering (3:2-18):**
  1. **Darkness (3:2): *He has led and brought me into darkness and not light.*** The prophet compares his experience to a terrifying walk in Stygian darkness. Darkness is probably symbolic here of the inability to comprehend the judgment which God has brought upon the nation.

2. *Smitten (3:3): Surely against me He keeps on turning His hand all day long.* The prophet compares his affliction to being smitten by the hand of God. The OT refers frequently to the *hand of God* (e.g., Isa 5:25; 53:4). No matter what the poet tried to do it seemed that God's hand was against him. Surely the prophet here is speaking as a representative of his people.
3. *Decrepitude (3:4): He has made my flesh and skin to waste away; He has broken my bones.* The prophet compares his trouble to old age with its wrinkled skin and fragile bones. Broken bones are one of the curses of old age for they do not heal easily.
4. *Siege (3:5): He has hemmed me in, surrounding me with bitterness and anguish.* The prophet compares his trials to the siege of a city. He has been surrounded and bombarded by bitterness and anguish. There is no escape. It is a struggle to merely survive.
5. *A lost man (3:6): He has made me dwell in dark places like those who are forever dead.* The prophet compares his situation to that of a lost dead man. Such a one is described as dwelling in dark places (cf. the *outer darkness* of Mt 25:30). "Those that have been long dead (ASV) and "the dead of old" (KJV) is better rendered "those who are forever or eternally dead." Following physical death the wicked experience the second death and hence can be spoken of as eternally dead. This v is a duplicate of Ps 143:3.
6. *Prisoner (3:7-8): He has built a wall about me and I cannot get out. He has put heavy chains upon me. (8) Even when I keep on crying and calling for help He shuts out my prayer.* The figure changes in vv 7-8 to that of a prison. The poet feels hedged in by an insurmountable wall and weighted down by heavy and unbreakable chains of brass. Although he cries out in his anguish, there is no answer to his cry for God shuts out his prayers.
7. *Obstacles (3:9): He has walled up my ways with hewn stone and my paths He has made crooked.* In a similar entrapment figure, the poet contends that a block has been thrown up across the path of his life. God has placed a wall of carefully prepared and closely fitting hewn stone to blockade his way. Since the straight and easy road to his life's goals was blocked he had to look for alternative routes. Walking the uncharted by-paths, the poet found himself in a maze of crooked paths most of which turned out to be blind alleys. He felt he was walking aimlessly without knowing his ultimate destiny.
8. *Wild beast (3:10-11): He is to me like a bear lying in wait, a lion in hiding. (11) He turned aside my ways, tore me in pieces and made me desolate.* In still another figure the poet depicts God as a lion or bear lying in wait for prey. Suddenly, unexpectedly the Lord has seized him and torn him to pieces. Amos (5:19) and Hosea (13:8) use this same figure.
9. *Target (3:12-13): He bent His bow and set me up as a target for His arrow. (13) He sent into my inward parts the shafts of His quiver.* The poet feels that he has become the target for the divine archer. The arrow of tribulation and persecution has found its mark in the *inward parts* (lit., the kidneys) and thus the poet is doomed to suffer a slow and painful death. The arrow metaphor is not uncommon in the OT (Ps 38:1-2; Job 6:4; 16:12-14).
10. *Laughingstock (3:14): I am an object of derision to all my people, their song all the day.* The prophet briefly drops the metaphors to complain as the representative of the believing individual that he is mocked and ridiculed by his people. All day long they

made him the object of their taunt songs. Pleasure-mad throngs cannot stand those who rebuke and warn of judgment.

11. *Food and drink (3:15-16): He has filled me to the brim with bitterness, caused me to drink wormwood. (16) He has ground my teeth with gravel and covered me over with ashes.* The poet compares his sorrow and anguish to food and drink. His food was *bitterness* which he was forced to eat until he was filled to the brim (lit., sated, nauseated); his drink was *wormwood*, a bitter substance usually associated with gall. As a sign of his disgrace and mourning the poet has heaped ashes upon himself. In so doing has gotten grit into his mouth.

12. *Inward feelings (3:17-18):*

a. *Turmoil (3:17): You have deprived my soul of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is.* The prophet was overwhelmed by the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem, In his great suffering he has lost all inner peace. He cannot even remember what it means to enjoy the blessings of life.

b. *Shaken faith (3:18): And I said, My strength has perished and my expectation from the LORD.* The poet is in the depths of despair. His strength, physical and spiritual, has perished. The confidence which he had previously placed in the Lord has been shaken and, in fact, has disappeared.

Yet all is not lost for the prophet. The moment he announces that he has lost his confidence in the Lord he has done something very significant. He has pronounced the precious name of God. The mention of the name of the Lord in this moment of deepest misery and despair helps the poet to find solid footing for his faith. To this Lord he turns in confident prayer (vv 19-39).

## HIS CONFESSION OF FAITH

3:19-39

The mention of the name of the Lord in v 18 served to jog the memory of a grief-stricken prophet. His thoughts are turned from self to the Savior. By turning his thoughts to God (vv 21-25) and by reflecting upon the nature of suffering (vv 26-39) the prophet is able to gain a great personal victory.

### A. Reflections about God (3:19-25):

1. *Call for remembrance (3:19-20): Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall. (20) My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.* Since the poet's outlook was bleak he tries the up-look. He calls upon God to remember his predicament because he himself is not able to forget about it. Mental and physical miseries are not easily forgotten especially when they continue to press in upon an individual. But while the poet could not for a moment forget his sufferings he did not allow himself to be done in by them.

2. *Confidence in God (3:21-25):* Bert Hall sees in vv 21-25 three pillars upon which the prophet reconstructed his faith: the nature, the person and the gifts of God.<sup>10</sup>

a. *Nature of God (3:21-22): This I will call to mind; therefore, I still have hope. (22) The lovingkindnesses of the LORD are the reason we have not been consumed; for His mercies never fail.* The poet first brings to mind the boundless mercy and

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<sup>10</sup>Hall, op. cit., 355.

compassion of God. If it were not for His lovingkindness all men would be instantly consumed. The Hebrew word used here is difficult to render by a single English word. The word is akin to the New Testament word for grace. The plural form of the word indicates the magnitude and repeated manifestations of His lovingkindness. His mercies or compassions-sympathetic love especially toward the helpless and suffering—never fail.

- b. *Gifts of God (3:23): They are new every morning; great is 'Your faithfulness.* The expressions of God's love and mercy are new every morning. Life, breath, opportunities, food, raiment—how often they are taken for granted; how seldom is thanks offered for them. As the prophet meditates upon the ceaselessness of God's mercy he breaks forth in a triumphant strain: Great is Your faithfulness! This v and the one which preceded it furnished the inspiration for Thomas Chisholm's magnificent hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness." This great affirmation of faith came from the lips of a man who had recently suffered what few others before or since have suffered. It was a time when men had only the most meager provisions. Every morsel of bread, every cup of water, every tattered garment was regarded as an evidence of the mercies of God.
- c. *Person of God (3:24-25): My portion is the LORD, says my soul, therefore I will hope in Him. (25) The LORD is good to the soul who waits for Him, to the soul that seeks Him.* Even though the poet had nothing of this world's goods to make him happy and secure, still he was satisfied for the Lord was his portion. The knowledge that he possessed God and God possessed him was the foundation for the hope of the prophet (v 24). To those souls who put their trust in Him God is good (v 25). God never forsakes His people!

**B. Reflections about Suffering (3:26-39):** Growing out of his reflections about God the poet makes several observations, some practical and some philosophical, about human suffering.

1. *Patience pays dividends (3:26): It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.* Patience and hope open the channels of salvation and deliverance. Boisterous complaint against the human predicament only tends to aggravate the situation. The believer should quietly wait in faith for the deliverance of the Lord.
2. *Self-discipline has positive benefits (3:27-30):*
  - a. *Toughens (3:27): It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.* If a young person can learn to bear the yoke of suffering he will not easily despair when he is old.
  - b. *Teaches patience (3:28): Let him sit alone and remain silent for He has laid it on him.* Suffering teaches one patience and hope (Rom 5:3-5) and helps one bring forth the fruit of righteousness (Heb 12:11). Such a one however must learn to suffer in solitude and silence. He should not grumble against the God who sent the tribulation nor should he yield to the temptation to appeal for the sympathy of others by discussing with them his aches and pains.
  - c. *Requires self-abasement (3:29): Let him put his mouth in the dust, perhaps there is hope.* The sufferer must bite the dust in self-abasement humbly to hope that there is hope.
  - d. *Requires submission (3:30): Let him give his cheek to the one who smites him; let him be filled with reproach.* The sufferer should willingly submit himself to

whatever injustices life has to offer. Even though he may be filled with reproach he should not pour it forth upon his antagonist (cf. Mt 5:38-39).

3. *Affliction is measured and purposeful (3:31-33):*
  - a. *Affliction temporary (3:31): **For the Lord will not reject forever.*** Present affliction does not mean that God has ultimately rejected His people for the Lord does not reject forever.
  - b. *Yahweh is God of mercy (3:32): **For though He may afflict, yet He will have compassion according to the multitude of His lovingkindness;*** Even in periods of chastisement Yahweh remains the God of mercy.
  - c. *Yahweh limits affliction (3:33): **for He does not desire to grieve and afflict the children of men.*** Yahweh does not permit one trial or temptation beyond what a man can endure. God takes no delight in seeing men suffer. Nevertheless, He permits men to suffer and sometimes administers the stroke against them in order to accomplish His own sovereign purposes in their lives.
4. *God hates unjust punishments (3:34-36): **To crush under foot all the prisoners of the earth, (35) to turn aside the right of a man before the face of the Most High, (36) to subvert a man in his cause, the LORD does not approve.*** God does not approve of punishment which is not just or purposeful. Political atrocities (v 34), injustice in legal proceedings (v 35) or, in fact, any social inequities (v 36) arouse His displeasure and demand His punishment. The phrase *before the face of the Most High* points to the fact that human judges are viewed as representatives of God.
5. *Yahweh's sovereign control (3:37-39):*
  - a. *General statement (3:37): **Who is it that speaks and it comes to pass if the Lord has not commanded it?*** Nothing is done in this world without God's permission. No one is able to make plans about the future and carry out those plans without the permission of the Lord.
  - b. *Yahweh pronounces punishments (3:38): **Do not pronouncements of misfortunes and prosperity proceed from the mouth of the Most High?*** God has clearly set forth in His word the conditions of blessing and the consequences of disobedience.
  - c. *Wrong-doing a matter of choice (3:39): **For what reason does a living man complain, each man because of the punishment for his sins?*** A man is not forced to choose wrong with its resultant punishment. On what basis then does a man complain when he is punished for his sin?

## HIS APPEAL FOR REPENTANCE

30:40-47

### A. Demonstration of Repentance (3:40-41):

1. *Self-examination (3:40): **Let us search and examine our ways and return to the LORD.*** Rather than complain about their suffering the prophet urges the people to repent of the sins which have brought about the suffering. Repentance begins with self-examination and honest analysis of their situation. Every individual must *search* (lit., dig into) and *examine* (lit., test or try) his heart. The objective of this rigorous self-examination is to discover and remove any impediments which may be preventing them from returning to the Lord. The Hebrew preposition translated *to* has the idea of actually

arriving at the goal. The poet is urging upon his hearers a complete and whole-hearted return to God.

2. *Prayer (3:41): Let us lift up our hearts and hands unto God in heaven.* Self-examination should be followed by sincere prayer. Hands uplifted towards heaven seems to have been one of the popular postures for prayer in OT times. But Jeremiah urges his hearers to lift up their heart as well as their hands to the Lord. Proper posture does not always mean proper prayer! In genuine prayer inward submission always accompanies outward acts of supplication. Perhaps they had heretofore prayed in the mechanical and formal sense. The prophet now urges them to put their heart into the exercise.

**B. Words of Repentance (30:42-47):** In vv 42-47 the prophet speaks the words which the people ought to use in their prayer of repentance.

1. *Confession (3:42): We have transgressed and rebelled; You have not forgiven.* The prayer begins with a confession of sin: “We have transgressed and rebelled!” The pronoun “we” is emphatic. There is no effort here to cover up or minimize the enormity of the sin. From this forthright confession of sin the prayer moves to description of the consequences of sin. (1) Sin cuts off the mercies of God. God had not pardoned nor could He pardon until the nation manifested some sign of genuine repentance.
2. *Acknowledgment of just punishment (3:43-46):*
  - a. *Wrath (3:43): You surrounded yourself with wrath and pursued us; You have slain without pity.* Sin stirs up divine wrath. The punishment against sin is swift, thorough, and relentless.
  - b. *Unanswered prayer (3:44): You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through.* Sin cuts the communication lines to heaven. God wraps Himself in a cloud through which no prayer can pass. Only when men turn from sin can God hear their prayers (Ps 66:18).
  - c. *Humiliation (3:45): You have made us as dung and refuse in the midst of the peoples.* Sin ultimately brings humiliation. Judah became like dung and refuse among the nations of the world because of sin.
  - d. *Ridicule (3:46): All our enemies rail against us.* Judah’s enemies railed against her with impunity.
  - e. *Panic (3:47): Panic and the pit have come upon us, devastation and destruction.* Sin results in panic and ruin. In the day of judgment one calamity after another befalls the sinner until he is finally destroyed.

### HIS PERSONAL SUFFERING

3:48-54

**A. Description of the Outburst (3:48-50):**

1. *Copious (3:48): With streams of water my eyes flow because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.* As the weeping prophet contemplates the judgment which has befallen his people he bursts into tears anew.
2. *Ceaseless (3:49): My eyes flow without ceasing, without any pause.* Without a moment’s pause he continues his sorrowful intercession.

3. *Purposeful (3:50): Until the LORD sees and looks down from heaven.* He is determined to pray until the Lord looks in tender compassion upon the affliction of His people.

**B. Explanation of the Outburst (3:51-53):**

1. *Defilement of maidens (3:51): My eyes afflict my soul because of all the daughters of my city.* The poet continues to be disturbed by the sight of the shameful defilement of the young maidens of Jerusalem.
2. *Personal suffering (3:52-54):* A problem arises with regard to the interpretation of vv 52-54. Many commentators feel that Jeremiah speaks here as a representative of the people of Judah and that he here is describing in figurative terms the experience of the nation. Others feel that Jeremiah is alluding here to his own experiences in the empty cistern before the fall of Jerusalem (Jer 38:6-13) or to some more recent similar experience. If allowance is made for poetic imagery there is no reason why vv 52-54 could not refer to the actual experience of the prophet.
  - a. *Hunted down (3:52): Those who had no reason to be my enemies have hunted me down like a bird.* Without justification the national leaders considered Jeremiah as a traitor to his nation. They hunted him down like a fowler hunts his prey.
  - b. *Thrown into a pit (3:53): They have cut off my life in the pit and have cast a stone on me.* The leaders planned to get rid of the prophetic pest permanently by casting him into a dungeon and then covering the mouth of that pit with a stone.
  - c. *Near death (3:54): Waters flowed over my head. I said, I am cut off.* Jeremiah sank into the mire of that empty cistern and the waters of death, as it were, flowed over his head. In the midst of his despair he cried out unto the Lord: *I am cut off* i.e., “I am as good as dead.”

### HIS PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE

3:55-66

The closing section of ch 3 is a prayer for deliverance which is filled with expressions of confidence that the prayer will be answered. The prophet here prays in the first person singular. But the “me” of these vv is in reality “us.”

- A. **First Petition (3:55-56):** *I called on Your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit. (56) You have heard my voice! Do not close Your ear to my sighing, to my cry for help!* As the prophet recalls the cistern experience and how God delivered him from that certain death his faith begins to grow. Just as God heard his cry from the dark dungeon of death (v 55) so he asks God not to ignore his present pleas for help (v 56).
- B. **Second Petition (3:57-59):** *You have drawn near in the day I called upon You. You said; Do not be afraid. (58) You have pleaded the causes of my soul, O Lord; You have redeemed my life. (59) You have seen, O LORD, the wrong done unto me. Judge my cause.* In the past God had answered his prayers by drawing near and whispering *Be not afraid!* (v 57). God had intervened on behalf of His servant, had taken up his cause, and had redeemed his very life (v 58). On the basis of God’s past response to his petition Jeremiah again calls upon God to hear and answer his prayer. Jeremiah is praying as an intercessor.

He is praying for his nation and as part of his nation. The enemies for whose destruction he prays must then be the Chaldean conquerors of Jerusalem. The petitioner realizes that God already knows the desperate plight of Judah, the wrongs which have been suffered. Therefore, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord to judge his cause i.e., judge those who have committed wrongs against the Jews (v 59).

**C. Third Petition (3:60-63):** *You have seen all of their vengeance, all of their plots against me, (62) the lips of those who rise up against me and their murmurings against me all the day. (63) Observe their sitting down and rising up. I am their song.* Yahweh had seen the vicious and vengeful plots against his people (v 60), the taunting and ridicule of the enemy (vv 61-62). The prophet asks that Yahweh will observe the actions of Jerusalem's enemies. All day long the Jews are the subject of Chaldean taunt-songs (v 63).

**D. Fourth Petition (3:64-66):** *Repay them, O LORD, according to the deeds of their hands. (65) Give them blindness of heart! Let Your curse be on them! (66) Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the LORD.* The prophet asks God to repay Jerusalem's enemies in accordance with the deeds they have done (v. 64). He prays that these opponents might experience blindness of heart i.e., intellectual confusion, and that God's curse might rest upon them (v 65). He asks God to destroy these enemies from off the face of the earth (v 66).

Verses 64-66 reflect that imprecatory mood which is so difficult for Christians to comprehend. However, these vv are best regarded not as a prayer for vengeance, but as a plea for justice. If a holy and just God rules this world then wrong must be punished and inequities must be eliminated. The petitioner was confident that God was just and therefore did not hesitate to call for God to act in accordance with His justice. There is no personal animosity in these words. The prophet prays as a representative of his people. In praying for the destruction of the Babylonians he prays that God will fulfill the threats already made against the conquerors of Jerusalem (Jer 25:12; 29:10; chs 50-51).

## REVIEW

1. How does the acrostic pattern in this ch differ from that of the first two chs of Lamentations?
2. Is the third ch of Lamentations an individual or a collective lament?
3. What is the meaning of the expression *those forever dead*? 3:6.
4. Does God always hear and answer prayer? 3:8.
5. What is "the wormwood and gall"? 3:19.
6. What thought about God became the foundation upon which the poet was able to reconstruct his hope?
7. In what sense are the mercies of God new every morning? 3:23.
8. What is the *yoke* which a man should bear in his youth? 3:27.
9. In what posture did people in Old Testament times often pray? 3:41.
10. Does Jeremiah refer to his own personal experience in the cistern in 3:53-54?
11. Is it right for a Christian to pray for the destruction of his enemies? 3:64.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## A RUINED KINGDOM

4:1-22

The fourth poem is an alphabetic acrostic like that found in chs 1 and 2 with the exception that the stanzas here have two lines instead of three. Here also the sixteenth and seventeenth letters of the Hebrew alphabet are reversed, but without any interruption in the thought sequence. No satisfactory explanation of this reversal of letters has yet been suggested. The ch emphasizes the suffering of the people of Jerusalem during and following the Chaldean siege. The poet uses the technique of contrast as he compares the former glory of the kingdom of Judah to the present wretched condition of the land. The poem falls into three parts. (1) The poet first gives an eyewitness account of the horrors which accompanied and followed the siege of Jerusalem (vv 1-10). (2) Then the prophet offers an explanation for this overwhelming calamity (vv 11-20). (3) Finally, the poet offers a ray of hope for his people, placing in contrast the future of Edom and the future of Israel (vv 21-22).

### DESCRIPTION OF THE JUDGMENT

4:1-10

#### A. Account of the Horrors (4:1-10):

1. *Temple stones (4:1): How sad that the gold has become dim, the best gold changed! Holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street.* The poet begins his lament by contrasting the former brightness of Judah with the present dark days. The golden Temple ornamentation which formerly glistened in the sunlight now is blackened and tarnished. The stones of the Temple lie scattered about at the head of every street leading from the Temple area.
2. *Sons (4:2): The precious sons of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold, how sad that they are regarded as clay vessels, the work of the potter's hands.* The youth of Zion, the most valuable asset of the nation, lie dead and scattered about like broken bits of pottery.
3. *Children (4:3-5):*
  - a. *Abandoned (4:3): Even the jackals draw out the breast to give suck to their young. The daughter of my people has become cruel like the ostriches in the wilderness.* The remaining portion of the poet's description of the judgment on Jerusalem focuses on the famine which the city experienced while under Babylonian siege. The children have suffered above all. The tortured and tormented mothers of Judah treat their babies worse than the wild animals treat their young. Wild and roving jackals (not sea monsters as in KJV) do not forget their offspring. But the famine has made the mothers of Jerusalem cruel like the ostrich. The ostrich was regarded by the ancients as the symbol of maternal neglect and cruelty (Job 39:13-17).
  - b. *Foodless (4:4): The tongue of the suckling child clings to thereof of his mouth for thirst; young children ask for bread but no man breaks it for them.* The babes of Jerusalem have no breasts to suckle and hence die from lack of nourishment. Young children ask for bread but no one takes note of their need.
4. *Affluent (4:5-6): They who were accustomed to eating delicacies perish in the streets; those who were brought up in purple resort to the dunghill. (6) For the chastisement of the daughter of my people has been greater than the punishment of Sodom which*

*was overturned suddenly, untouched by any hand.* The wealthy also suffer in the famine. What a pitiful sight it must have been to see those who were accustomed to the finest foods and garments perishing in the streets with the poor or scavenging in the city garbage dumps (v 5). The lingering agony of the starving city causes the poet to make a painful comparison. Jerusalem has experienced a more severe fate than ancient Sodom. Sodom's fall was sudden but Jerusalem's agony and suffering was prolonged over a period of several months (v 6).

5. *Princes (4:7-8): Her princes were purer than snow, whiter than milk; they were more ruddy in body than coral, as sapphire was their form. (8) Blacker than soot has their appearance become, they are not recognized on the streets. Their skin hugs their bones having become dry like a stick. (9) Those who were slain by the sword were better off than those who were slain by the famine, for these pine away, stricken through for want of the products of the field.* The nobles of the land (or perhaps the Nazirites) also suffered greatly from the famine. Once they were the picture of health—rosy cheeks, fair complexion, stately appearance (v 7). But as a result of the pangs of hunger these nobles have been reduced to skin and bones. Their fair skin is now black and leathery. No one can even recognize these once famous personages on the streets of the city (v 8). How much better off were those that had died suddenly by the sword in battle than those who wasted away day by day (v 9).
6. *Women (4:10): The hands of tenderhearted women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people.* Most pitiful of all are the women of Judah. Once tender-hearted and loving mothers, these women have been so crazed by hunger that they have forgotten their maternal affection. In order to preserve their own lives they were boiling and eating their own children!

## EXPLANATION OF THE JUDGMENT

4:11-20

In vv 11-20 the poet begins to explain the horrendous calamity which has befallen Judah.

### A. God's Wrath (4:11-12):

1. *Devastating (4:11): The LORD has given vent to His wrath. He has poured out His fierce anger. He kindled a fire in Zion, which has consumed her foundations.* The ultimate cause of Zion's downfall was the burning wrath of the Lord.
2. *Unexpected (4:12): Neither the kings of the earth nor the inhabitants of the world believed that the adversary and the enemy would enter the gates of Jerusalem.* The leaders of the city, and in fact all the inhabitants of the world, believed that Jerusalem was invulnerable. The idea that the Lord would not destroy His special abode probably was based upon the miraculous last-minute deliverance of Jerusalem from the armies of the Assyrian Sennacherib in the days of King Hezekiah (Isa 37).

### B. Religious Leaders (4:13-16):

1. *Their sin (4:13): It was because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests who shed the blood of innocent persons in the midst of her.* Not only were these leaders guilty of perverting the word of the Lord, they were also guilty of murder,

perhaps not directly, but indirectly. Because of their counsel and encouragement many innocent people had been executed by the government.

2. *Their punishment (4:14-16):*

- a. *Confusion (4:14): They staggered like blind men in the streets. They were polluted with blood so that none could touch their garments.* When Jerusalem came under the Chaldean siege and the city eventually fell these leaders who had confidently predicted divine deliverance were thrown into confusion. They were so defiled by blood that men could not touch them.
- b. *Exile (4:15): Turn back! Unclean! men cried to them; Turn back! Turn back! Do not touch! When they fled away and wandered, men said among the nations, They shall no more sojourn there.* Their countrymen treated the former leaders as though they were unclean lepers. People who met them in the way applied to them the warning cry which lepers were to use if anyone approached them. Shunned by their own countrymen these discredited religious leaders fled to foreign lands. But even there these priests and prophets were not wanted. They were forced to become vagabonds wandering from one land to another.
- c. *Repudiation (4:16): The face of the LORD has scattered them, He will no more regard them. They do not respect priests nor do they favor elders.* It is the *face of the Lord*, i.e., His anger, which has scattered these worthless leaders. Because they are not worthy of their office the Lord no longer regards them as prophets, priests, and elders nor do the people show to these leaders the respect and favor which the dignity of their office would normally evoke.

C. **Stubbornness of Jerusalemites (4:17-20):** The poet points to the stubborn and stupid resistance of the inhabitants of Jerusalem as the second explanation of the severity of Jerusalem's judgment. Having committed the fundamental error of disobedience to the word of God the people of Judah stumbled on through those last years trusting confidently in false theological premises and human ingenuity. The poet points out four specific ways in which the nation had been deluded and deceived.

1. *Trust in foreign alliances (4:17): Our eyes failed continuing to look for our help in vain; in our watching we watched for a nation which could not save.* To the bitter end they had put their trust in foreign allies, particularly Egypt. On one occasion Pharaoh had made an attempt to come to the aid of Jerusalem but his forces were driven off by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, Jerusalem's hope that Pharaoh Hophra could defeat the Babylonians proved vain. The troops of Nebuchadnezzar returned to the siege.
2. *Trust in Jerusalem's walls (4:18): They hunted our steps preventing us from walking in our streets. Our end drew near, our days were filled up because our end had come.* The nation had been led to believe that they could successfully resist the might of Babylon. But with each passing day it became ever more obvious that the end had come. Missiles hurled into the city from Chaldean siege towers made any public assembly within the city hazardous. It was stupid to continue to resist.
3. *Trust in flight (4:19): More swift were our pursuers than the eagles of the heavens. Upon the hills they chased us, in the wilderness they laid in wait for us.* The inhabitants of Jerusalem also mistakenly thought they could flee the falling city if worse came to worst. But flight was in vain. The enemy like eagles swooping down upon the prey pounced upon any who tried to escape the siege.

4. *Trust in their king (4:20): The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the LORD, was captured in their pits, the one of whom we had said, Under his shadow we shall live among the nations.* The inhabitants of Jerusalem were deceived in believing that they could find protection by adhering to Zedekiah the king of Judah. Because the life of a kingdom depends upon having a king, Zedekiah is called by the poet *the breath of our nostrils*. Zedekiah was the anointed of the Lord and the current representative of the house of David. The people were supremely confident that God would never allow the house of David to be completely overthrown. But Zedekiah was captured by the Chaldeans and deported to Babylon, a blind and broken man.

The people had been misled by their leaders into thinking that Jerusalem was inviolable and the dynasty of David unconquerable. They had placed their trust in man and had persistently refused to heed the word of God. They have no one but themselves to blame for the severity of Jerusalem's sufferings.

## EXPECTATION ABOUT JUDGMENT

4:21-22

Edom and Judah were traditional enemies. During the western rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar in 589 B.C. Edom had remained loyal to the Chaldean king. When Jerusalem was going through her death throes Edom had acted in a most hostile and haughty way. Edom's sin began with indifference. She showed no concern over what was befalling her neighbor. From indifference Edom went on to rejoice over the destruction of the people of God. At some point the Edomites actually entered the weakened and helpless city of Jerusalem. They had reveled and caroused in the Temple mount. They had even helped the Chaldeans capture the poor fugitives who tried to escape the calamity of their nation (Obad 10-16). Ezekiel mentions that Edom tried to annex some of Judah's territory at this time (Ezek 35:10-12).

- A. **Edom's Inappropriate Joy (4:21):** *Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, who dwells in the land of Uz! But to you also shall the cup pass. You shall become drunk and make yourself naked.* This ancient enemy, Edom, is ironically urged to rejoice and sing i.e., to enjoy their moment of triumph. But their joy will be short-lived! The cup of divine wrath is about to pass to Edom. Jeremiah had prophesied that Edom along with most of the other nations of Syria-Palestine would have to taste of the cup of God's wrath through the hand of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 25:15-28). Edom is reminded that she must drink that dreaded cup till she becomes intoxicated and experiences shame, confusion, sorrow, and destruction. She will be stripped of all her power and glory.
- B. **Edom's Coming Judgment (4:22):** *The punishment of your iniquity is complete, O daughter of Zion! He will no more cause you to go into captivity! But your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, He will punish, He will uncover your sins.* Judah has been severely punished but her punishment is over. A ray of hope illuminates the darkness of Judah's present situation. For her a better day is dawning. Once she has returned from exile she will never again be carried away captive as a nation. The deliverance here predicted finds its fulfillment in the Messianic age when God granted salvation to His people, the New Israel, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Edom's future, on the other hand, is not so bright. Her

sin is about to be punished. The last remnant of Edom perished during the revolt against Rome in the early years of the Christian era, AD 70-71.<sup>11</sup>

## REVIEW

1. Judged according to form, to what other ch in Lamentations does ch 4 most nearly correspond?
2. Why did Jeremiah compare his people to an ostrich? 4:3.
3. In what respect was the punishment of Zion greater than that of Sodom? 4:6.
4. What is the evidence of the severity of the famine in Jerusalem?
5. What was the attitude of the poet toward priests and prophets? 4:13.
6. What was the nation to which Zion looked for help in her desperate hour? 4:17.
7. To whom is the poet referring in 4:20?
8. Why is Edom told to rejoice over the fate of Zion? 4:21.
9. What is the contrast between the future of Zion and the future of Edom ? 4:22.

## CHAPTER FIVE PENITENT NATION 5:1-22

The form of the fifth poem differs in at least two respects from the four which precede it. First, this poem is not in the acrostic form. But like chs 1, 2 and 4 it does have twenty-two vv which indicates that these five poems belong together. Secondly, ch 5 is a prayer and not a dirge. While the poem does contain a recital of the miseries recently suffered by the people, the purpose of the poet here is to appeal to the compassion of God so as to gain His help. The poem consists of two unequal parts. (1) In vv 1-18 the poet describes the present reproach of Zion, and (2) in vv 19-22 he requests the restoration or renewal of Zion.

### REPROACH OF ZION DESCRIBED

5:1-18

**A. Petition (5:1):** *Remember, O LORD, what has come upon us! Take note and observe our reproach.* That ch 5 is a prayer is indicated by the language of v 1. There is a sense of desperation and urgency in these words. Of course God has not forgotten His people. He is not oblivious of their suffering. But when God hesitates to deliver one from reproach and difficulty it often seems to the sufferer that He has forgotten. The words of v 1 also reflect the hope and faith of the poet. He stands as a petitioner before a judge to present his case. He is sure that if he can present a convincing picture of the desperation and repentance of Israel that the Judge of all the earth will intervene on their behalf. The prophet is pleading with God to demonstrate by divine intervention that He is aware of what has happened to His people.

**B. Jerusalem's Reproach (5:2-10):**

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<sup>11</sup>Josephus, *Jewish Wars* IV. 5; V. 6.1.

1. *Lost inheritance (5:2): **Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our houses to foreigners.*** The condition of Israel was truly pitiable. Their reproach was great. They had lost everything. Their “inheritance” (land) and their houses had been given to strangers probably as payment for aiding in the Chaldean conquest of Jerusalem.
2. *Decimated population (5:3): **We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows.*** With the male population practically decimated, those who remained were virtually widows and orphans.
3. *Scarce essentials (5:4): **We drink our water with silver, our wood comes to us for a price.*** Such essential items as water and wood were so scarce that they had to be purchased from the captors.
4. *Ruthless oppressors (5:5): **Our pursuers are upon our necks; we are weary, but we have no rest.*** They were cruelly oppressed. The Chaldean troops that occupied the land gave the people no rest. They were “breathing down their neck” all the time. The Jewish remnant was constantly forced to labor for the enemy and were given no time to rest.
5. *Cruel extortion (5:6): **We have given the hand to Egypt, and to Assyria, in order to get bread.*** In order to obtain food the Jerusalemites had been forced to give their hand in solemn pledge of surrender and servitude to Egyptian and Assyrian traders who passed through the land.
6. *Painful confession (5:7): **Our fathers sinned but they are dead. We have borne their iniquities.*** This is not a complaint but a confession. The poet is not claiming that his generation has been punished unjustly for the people confess their guilt in v 16. The Jerusalemites recognize that the sins of the past have caught up with them. This v is an acknowledgement of the principle that sin often has consequences which extend from one generation to another. Of course the OT clearly teaches that every individual sinner is punished for his own sin (Jer 31:30; Ezek 18: 1 ff); but if children continue to walk in the footsteps of their wicked fathers and even surpass their fathers in wickedness they may expect to be punished with ever increasing severity (see Jer 16:11-12). The consequences of sin are cumulative. The passing of time gives more opportunity for hearing and obeying the word of God. Therefore, the generation of Jeremiah was even more guilty than previous generations because they had neglected more opportunities, more warnings, and ignored more judgments than their fathers. Verse 7, then, is not an excuse for the people but an explanation of the severity of their suffering.
7. *Inept rulers (5:8): **Slaves rule over us! There is no one to deliver us from their hand.*** Babylonian mercenaries, some of whom had been former slaves of the Jews, now ruled over the land.
8. *Inescapable danger (5:9): **At the risk of our lives we bring our bread because of the sword of the wilderness.*** With no stable government to restrain them, marauding Bedouin tribes who lived on the fringes of the desert raided the valley farms. Only at great risk of life could the harvest be brought in.
9. *Hunger (5:10): **Our skin is hot like an oven because of the fever of hunger.*** A virtual famine continued to exist in the land and the people suffered greatly because of it. Malnutrition has resulted in disease with attendant fever.

**C. Suffering of Specific Groups (5:11-14):** All sections of the population had suffered immeasurably.

1. *Women and maidens (5:11): Women were ravished in Zion, maidens in the streets of Judah.* The women of Judah had been raped. It was unsafe for a maiden to walk the streets of Jerusalem.
2. *Princes and elders (5:12): Princes were hanged by their hands; elders were not respected.* The princes of the land had been impaled and left to die a slow and shameful death. The cruel enemy had no respect for the older people of the land.
3. *Young and old (5:13-14): Young men carried the mill and youths staggered with wood. (14) Elders have left the gate, young men their songs.* What few young men survived the siege and capture of Jerusalem were forced to grind grain which was usually the work of women or slaves. Even the younger boys were compelled to serve the enemy by carrying huge loads of fire wood (v 13). Elders no longer assembled to conduct their business in the gates of the city. Young men could no longer get together to make merry (v 14).

**D. Mental Condition (5:15-17):** In these vv the passage reaches its climax as the poet acknowledges the justice of the present sufferings.

1. *Joy lost (5:15): The joy of our heart has ceased, our dance has changed to mourning.* The once joyous people were now experiencing only bitter sorrow.
2. *Glory lost (5:16): The crown of our head has fallen! Woe now to us, for we have sinned.* Like a crown toppling from the head of a deposed monarch, so the glory of Judah has suddenly and completely been removed. The nation experiences misery and woe because *we have sinned* against God.
3. *Temple lost (5:17-18): For this our heart is faint; for these things our eyes are darkened; (18) because of Mount Zion which is desolate, jackals walk on it.* The heart of the people is sick with sorrow, their eyes darkened by tears because of the national loss (v 17). The sacred hill of Mount Zion where once proudly stood the Temple of Solomon is now desolate. Jackals have made their home in the ruins of God's Temple (v 18). Sin always pays off in wages of death and destruction.

## RESTORATION OF ZION REQUESTED

5:19-22

Having presented his case before the divine Judge Jeremiah enters his appeal.

**A. Approach to God (5:19-20):**

1. *Praise (5:19): You, O LORD, are enthroned forever! Your throne is from generation to generation.* The appeal is first anchored securely in a basic theological truth: the everlasting sovereign rule of Yahweh. The emphatic position of the pronoun suggests a contrast. The poet has described at length in vv 1-18 the destruction and loss of all the temporal blessings which God had given His people. Earthly things may pass away but God remains. Though conditions of earth may seem to deteriorate, the Eternal is still on His throne. His Temple on earth may be destroyed but His heavenly throne cannot be overthrown. When the disillusioned and down-trodden recapture this basic truth they have laid the foundation upon which hope can be reconstructed and petition presented before God.
2. *Perplexity (5:20): Why have You forgotten us forever, forsaken us for so many days?* The appeal to God takes the form of a question. To those who had recently come

through the siege of Jerusalem the prospects of fifty more years of servitude to Babylon (Jer 25:12) seemed like an eternity. It seemed to them that God had forgotten and forsaken them forever. Suffering always leads to a sense of abandonment.

**B. Petition to God (5:21-22):**

1. *Assistance in repentance (5:21a): **Turn us, O LORD, unto You that we may return!*** In desperation and complete submission they call upon God to help and aid them to properly repent. The people realize that restoration and renewal are dependent upon complete return to God and they are most anxious that their repentance meet with divine approval.
2. *Assistance in restoration (5:21b): **Renew our days as of old.*** The suffering people ask God to restore Judah to its former state.
3. *Assistance based on prior promises (5:22): **Unless You have utterly rejected us, are angry with us exceedingly.*** An utter and complete rejection would not be in harmony with the promises that God already had made about the future of Israel (Jer 27:19ff; 29:10ff). If God still rules, if the people are willing to submit to Him, if He has not utterly rejected them, then God must intervene on behalf of His people.

Thus the sad book of Lamentations closes with a fervent appeal for God's aid and a confident expectation that He would indeed intervene on behalf of His people.

**REVIEW**

1. In what respect is the fifth ch of Lamentations different from the previous four chs?
2. What did the inhabitants of Zion have to do in order to secure the necessities of life? 5:4-6.
3. Is v 7 a complaint against the injustice of Zion's punishment?
4. What is meant by "the sword of the wilderness"? 5:9.
5. For what is the prophet praying in 5:21?