

Contents

Timeline	8-9
Preface.....	11
1. Lamentations (Lamentations 1–5)	15
2. The View from Anathoth (Jeremiah 1)	31
3. Judgments (Jeremiah 2–6).....	41
4. Delusions (Jeremiah 7–10)	53
5. Protests: The First Group (Jeremiah 11–15)	71
6. Protests: The Second Group (Jeremiah 16–20).....	89
7. Betrayals (Jeremiah 21–23)	109
8. The View from Jerusalem (Jeremiah 24–25).....	123
9. Intentions (Jeremiah 26–29).....	133
10. Promises (Jeremiah 30–33).....	147
11. Failures (Jeremiah 34–36).....	165
12. Endings (Jeremiah 37–39).....	177
13. Continuations (Jeremiah 40–45)	191
14. The View from Tahpanhes (Jeremiah 46–51).....	209
15. Destinies (Jeremiah 52)	227
Study Questions	241
Subject Index.....	251
Scripture Index	257

Lamentations

(Lamentations 1–5)

'O happy band of pilgrims'?

The first line of John Mason Neale's once-popular hymn is emphatically not the right title for the little drama with which we begin. True, it is about a 'band of pilgrims', but as these people are nearing their goal, the first distant glimpse of the holy place to which they are travelling will warn them that they will scarcely recognize it: the very skyline has changed. In a sombre mood they make their way towards the devastated suburbs of the city. Even if the great temple at its heart is now a blackened ruin, they can at least pay their respects there to the God whose house it used to be.

They never reach it. A marauding gang of ex-soldiers which has survived the war sets upon them, and soon another heap of carcasses is left for the crows to pick, dumped in a pit at Mizpah.

The incident was recorded centuries ago, in the Book of Jeremiah.¹ But the image of *die tote Stadt*, the dead city, is as real today as ever it was. The elegant streets of Melbourne, intact, but empty of every living thing, at the end of the 1959 movie *On the Beach*. New York, in the imagination of later film-makers flooded (*Deep Impact*) or frozen (*The Day After Tomorrow*). The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 1945: that actually happened. So did the burning of Moscow, 1812. These images haunt the world's dreams, as did the fall of

1 Jeremiah 41:1-7.

Constantinople in 1453 and that of Rome a thousand years before. Babylon fell, too, a thousand years earlier still, though its final destruction is even today a vision yet to be fulfilled.² But the sack of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.³, the background to the massacre just described, has a significance greater than them all.

It is the theme of five songs, written at the time or soon after, which appear in our Bibles as the Book of Lamentations, and will be for us a way in to Jeremiah's book. They are as much about Jerusalem dying as about Jerusalem dead: the siege as well as the sack of the city, a tale of suffering, starvation and despair, till finally the walls are breached, the survivors deported, the goods looted and the city torched.

Traditionally these songs have been thought of as Jeremiah's work. More recently, differences between them and the bigger book (and indeed between them themselves) have been thought to indicate one or more anonymous authors, though there is no reason why Jeremiah should not have written in different styles and from different viewpoints at different times. At all events, the 'voices' vary in the course of the five poems, so that the speaker is at one point the city of Jerusalem, at another a particular person involved in its suffering, and at yet others an observer describing these events.

A lamentable state of affairs (1:1-22)

Every part of the Bible, not least its poetry, repays the effort of working out how it is put together. 'Structural analysis' is the name of the game. Looked at in this way, the most obvious feature of these songs is the number of verses in each: either 22 or a multiple of 22. Since the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, we may not be surprised to learn that Lamentations 1 is an acrostic, like several of the psalms (most notably Psalm 119); that is to say, the first letter of the first word of the first verse of

² See Revelation 18.

³ The year has generally been reckoned to be 587 B.C., but recent research seems to point rather to the following year, 586 B.C. See John L. Mackay, *Jeremiah* (Tain: Christian Focus 2004), vol. 2, pp. 588-9, 612-13; Leslie McFall, 'The Sixty-Nine Weeks of Daniel', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52/4 (December 2009), pp. 694-718; 'The Chronological Data in Kings and Chronicles', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 148 (1991); and other works available online at www.btinternet.com/~lmf12.

the first song is *aleph*, while *beth* begins verse 2, *gimel* verse 3, and so on – the equivalent of our ABC. So what we have in an acrostic is something akin to rhyme, except that it is the sounds at the beginning of lines, not those at the end of them, that follow a pattern.⁴

This song has another, more complicated, kind of ‘rhyming’ as well. Every verse contains an idea, usually an actual word or phrase, which reappears elsewhere, in a curious but regular fashion: the first verse is linked in this way with the last verse, the second with the next to last, and so forth.⁵ That is, the acrostic is also a palindrome, like the words ‘civic’ and ‘redder’, or the sentences ‘Madam, I’m Adam’ and ‘Rise to vote, sir’.⁶ At the midpoint, therefore, these ‘rhymes’ come together: ‘See and observe,’ says verse 11, ‘observe and see,’ says verse 12;⁷ and those words are in fact the keynote of the chapter – a view of the recent turmoils in Jerusalem, as they appear to an onlooker (call him the Writer) in the first half, and as they are experienced by the City herself in the second half. The Writer, and his ‘rhymes’, work up to verse 11, where he asks Yahweh too to look at these facts. The City, and her ‘rhymes’, begin from verse 12, there asking the passers-by – other nations, that is, uninvolved in the conflict – to look at what has happened.

First, then, the Writer’s observations. They can be followed through in the text, a verse to each word or phrase. ‘This place’, he says, ‘was once the home of many people; / now that it needs comforters there are only enemies, / there is deep distress, / the priests suffering, / the young taken captive – / such is the fate of Zion, / abandoned, / rejected; / where is God?’ So the first nine verses, a panorama ending in verse 10

4 The Hebrew letters are occasionally mentioned in what follows. Readers unfamiliar with the Hebrew alphabet may like to check it out, and will find it in most English Bibles as the headings of the 22 sections of Psalm 119.

5 English versions often disguise these parallels, as we find from the very beginning, where ‘full’ in 1:1 is the same word (*rab*) as ‘many’ in 1:22. See also the next note.

6 Less artificial than these 22-verse palindromes, and underlying many parts of Scripture besides the poetry of the Old Testament, is the kind of palindromic structure called ‘chiasmus’, where ABA (or ABCBA, or any such sequence) have nothing to do with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, but indicate the arrangement of topics.

7 Even the *esv* lets us down here, giving ‘look and see ... look and see’, which spoils the palindrome.

with an ominous hand stretched out to steal or destroy everything of value in Jerusalem. After the 'hinge' at verses 11-12, a parallel sequence of word-pictures will appear in reverse order in verses 13-22, beginning with a stretched-out net. But first, as the Writer has been 'seeing and observing' the facts of the case, he has put briefly into the mouth of the City (verses 9b, 11b) a plea that Yahweh will do the same.

Is there in this world of ours a lamentable state of affairs that corresponds to that one? Of course, we have to make all sorts of adjustments in order to see today the equivalent of what our Writer was seeing when the kingdom of Judah fell in ruins before his eyes. For one thing, that single image occupied all his attention, whereas innumerable tragedies from across the globe compete for ours. For another, to him everything seemed dark, whereas we are gratefully aware of light as well as darkness, the light both of the saving gospel and of common grace. For yet another, that gospel had not appeared in its fullness to him, whereas we know Christ the Lord of glory, the multi-national Israel of God, and the heavenly Jerusalem of which all His people are citizens: Old Testament buds that have now burst into New Testament bloom.⁸

Bearing these differences in mind, we have to say that if Jeremiah's Jerusalem has a modern equivalent, it is the church of Jesus Christ, which in our New Testament era is no longer tied to a particular place in the Middle East, though it is not yet sinless as it will be in the world to come. And we have to ask whether three basic facts about that Jerusalem and its relation to its God are true of the church today. All have been touched on already in the Writer's half of this song, and all are now confessed by the City herself in verses 12-22. 'Observe and see' is now her plea, as it was his, and now it is addressed to those 'who pass by'.

First and most obvious is the fact that she is in dire trouble. This is the background to the song (and indeed the book) as a whole. It is possible of course to react to the 'sufferings of Jerusalem' emotionally and unthinkingly. We must not automatically assume that for us that phrase simply means troubles that beset Christians (or indeed Jews) in today's world. Reports of the present persecution of Christian believers in

⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:8; Galatians 6:16; Hebrews 12:22, Philipians 3:20.

many Asian and African countries may horrify us and stir us to action, for the trials of God's people anywhere should be the concern of God's people everywhere; 'if one member suffers, all suffer together.'⁹ But they should not surprise us, for it is only 'through many tribulations' that Christ's people 'enter the kingdom of God,'¹⁰ and we ourselves are not likely to be exempt. Persecution, however, is what Peter's first letter calls 'suffering *unjustly*'. He would put the City's distress in quite a different category, and tell her frankly, 'You sin and are beaten for it.'¹¹ This is the second fact: that her suffering is her own fault. The Writer has simply said 'Jerusalem sinned' (v. 8), but the City is past pretending, and now admits repeatedly how she has rebelled and transgressed (vv. 14, 18, 20, 22).

The third fact is the hardest for the modern mind to accept. But significantly it is the City herself, not the Writer, who recognizes it and spells it out unambiguously. Her sufferings are, she says, 'my sorrow ... which the LORD inflicted' (v. 12), and that is the first of a score of verbs that tell us God's part in these events. All that has happened to her is her fault, *and His doing*. Not only is she prepared to say so, but she wants all the nations to hear it too (v. 18). In her half of the song He is almost as often Adonai (Lord), the Sovereign, the Master of all peoples, as He is Yahweh (LORD), Israel's own covenant God. To these two names we shall return.

Three facts, then: the City is in trouble, she has deserved it, God has inflicted it. To take the last of them first, it was Yahweh who brought about the destruction of Jerusalem, and the *purpose* of that was twofold. In His scheme of things, His people had been for 450 years a nation-state ruled by kings of the line of David, but the 'shape' of Israel was about to change, just as it would change again even more radically six centuries later. In 586 B.C. He was putting an end not to Israel the nation,¹² but only to Israel the Davidic monarchy, for there were different lessons yet to be learned about what it means to be the people of God. All the events of that time, bad as well as

9 1 Corinthians 12:26.

10 Acts 14:22.

11 1 Peter 2:19-20.

12 The tree of Jesse would be cut down, but one day there would 'come forth a shoot from the stump' (Isa. 11:1).

good, were part of His comprehensive educational plan; and now as then His people find that that plan is often puzzling, sometimes shocking, and always far bigger (and eventually better) than they ever imagined.

And you cannot have education without discipline. This other aspect of His purpose for His people takes us back at once to the second of the facts, the *cause* of Jerusalem's downfall. The nation had to learn that privileges bring responsibilities, and sins have consequences. Even today, when deterrence and rehabilitation seem to be the chief aims of our penal system, there is still such a thing as punishment.¹³ Some of our misfortunes are the penalty for our misdeeds. So in Lamentations 1 the City admits that what God has been doing, she has richly merited. And we might conceivably come under the same condemnation. No Christians, and no Christian communities, can ever truthfully say they have no sins to confess, and (as the hymn puts it) 'they who fain would serve Thee best are conscious most of wrong within.'¹⁴ It is a community called by God's name that is here deservedly going through the mill.

However, the divine justice is scrupulously fair. There are sins and sins, and the *experience* of the City's fall, the first of the three facts, was a consequence – terrible, but just – of the deep-seated, unrepentant, deliberate, continuous and far-reaching sins of the wicked Jehoiakim and the weak Zedekiah, the royal brothers whose follies the Book of Jeremiah will expose, and of others like them. There is no denying that such suffering may come also to those who practise daily repentance, faith and obedience, but for them it will be the 'fiery trial' of 1 Peter 4:12, not a punishment but a solemn privilege. Jeremiah himself was just such a one.

A lamentable chain of consequences (2:1-22)

It was with the plight of the City that the first song began; but soon, and then often thereafter, she had to confess that this was a punishment for her sin from the hand of her God. That, we shall find, is the theme of the second song from start

¹³ See C. S. Lewis's famous essay on 'The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment', in *Undeceptions* (London: Geoffrey Bles 1971).

¹⁴ Henry Twells, 'At even, when the sun was set.'

to finish. Being as regular an acrostic-cum-palindrome as the first was,¹⁵ it both begins and ends with a God who 'in the day of his anger' (vv. 1 and 22) shows no pity (vv. 2 and 21), brings about a dreadful devouring in verse 3 and a worse one in verse 20, and so continues, in a strict poetic sequence that nevertheless trembles with mortification and horror.

Who says what in the course of the song? Commentators differ over headings and sub-headings for it. The simpler the better, in my view, given the genius that can express so much emotion with so much discipline. There is, as before, a hinge at the centre of the palindrome: 'bile poured out/faint in the streets' (v. 11), 'faint in the streets/life poured out' (v. 12). Moving towards it are ten verses in which the Writer describes objectively what God has been doing to the City. Then all at once, in the two 'hinge' verses, he becomes one with its citizens, and 'sits where they sit'.¹⁶ He has thus far been speaking *about* them; now for the remaining ten verses he speaks *to* them, with an inspired blend of deep fellow-feeling and prophetic ruthlessness. True, verses 20-22 are addressed to the Lord, but they need not form a separate section; they are still the Writer's words, in which he is giving the City a form of prayer that he and she together can use in these extreme circumstances.

If readers new to the Bible happened to open it at this chapter, they might wonder why (in most English translations) it refers to God sometimes as 'the Lord' and sometimes as 'the LORD' – in fact seven times each. The difference, which we noticed in chapter 1, gives us a line on why Jerusalem is suffering the miseries described here.

Jerusalem was an Israelite city, the capital of an Israelite kingdom, only because God had long before called Israel to be His own people, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt and making with them a covenant that detailed His promises to them and their obligations to Him. All of that was wrapped up in His covenant name Yahweh, the LORD. In consequence, they had been blessed with the leadership of Moses the lawgiver, Joshua his successor, and a line first of judges and

15 Except that for some reason v. 16 begins with *pe* and v. 17 with *ayin*, reversing the normal alphabetical order.

16 Cf. Ezekiel 3:15.

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Jeremiah was set aside to be the prophet to the nations. Set apart to be a voice that was not afraid to stand up for sharing the message of the Lord to those running headlong towards judgment. There are responsibilities for those who belong to God. However God still loves His people even when they have sinned against Him. We are reassured that hope can be found even in times of suffering. Lamentations tells Jerusalem's story of suffering, starvation and despair, till finally the walls are breached, the survivors deported, the goods looted and the city torched.

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