

Lamentations teaches us how to mourn – how to weep – how to lament.

In the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations is found in between Ecclesiastes and Esther.

The order is Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel –
books that reflect on the trials of life in exile.

But the LXX placed it right after Jeremiah – and there are lots of allusions to Jeremiah’s prophecies,
so it is fitting to consider it in that context as well.

But I think that it is better to think of Lamentations in terms of *wisdom literature*
than as a “prophet.”

We are not dealing especially with *sermons* as much as with *songs*.

The first four chapters of Lamentations are alphabetical acrostics –

an acrostic is a poem in which each line (or in this case, each verse)
begins with a subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The acrostic form provides a way of providing completeness –
“from A to Z” as it were –

and is a fitting form for expressing something that is inexpressible.

As one commentator puts it,

“It is perhaps a sublime literary touch that the poems of this book,
which express the inexpressible, use such a formal and rigid style,
whose controlling structural device is the very letters
that signify and give shape to language.

The world order of Lamentations has been disrupted;
no order exists any longer in the real world.

But as if to counteract this chaos,

the poet has constructed his own linguistic order
that he marks out graphically for us

by the orderly progression of the letters of the alphabet.” (Adele Berlin, 4-5)

Or to take it a step further,

the alphabetical acrostics of Lamentations
provide a reminder of the utter necessity
for the *Word* to become flesh

if our deconstructed world is ever going to be put back together!

“Each chapter presents the destruction from a different perspective.

Chapter 1 focuses on Jerusalem, the destroyed city,
pictured in her mourning, her shame, and her desolation.

The tone is one of despair, depression, degradation, shame, and guilt.

The destruction is complete and the reader stands among the ruins.

Chapter 2 takes the reader back to the moment of destruction,
with all its physical and theological force.

The picture is full of anger and fury –

God's anger at the city and the poet's anger at God..

The chapter focuses on God, the perpetrator of the destruction.

The anger of God overshadows the guilt of Jerusalem.

Chapter 3 portrays the process of exile, with its alternating moods of despair and hope.

The speaker is a lone male,

a Joblike figure trying to come to terms with what has happened.

His view is personal but at the same time representative of the people.

Chapter 4 focuses on the people, reliving the siege and the suffering that accompanied it – the toll it took on the inhabitants of the city.

The chapter paints a picture of utter degradation.

Chapter 5 is the prayer of the Judean remnant, weakened and impoverished,

deprived of king and temple,

pleading with God not to abandon them forever,

hoping that the former relationship between God and Israel will be renewed.” (Berlin, 7)

There is a tension in Lamentations (as in so much of OT poetry)

between the acknowledgment of God's faithfulness

and the reality of suffering –

indeed, the realization that *God has brought* this suffering.

1. The Princess Enslaved and Bereaved (v1-6)

The opening verse of Lamentations should bring us to tears!

How lonely sits the city

that was full of people!

How like a widow has she become,

she who was great among the nations!

She who was a princess among the provinces

has become a slave.

The lonely city which has become like a widow –

bereft of husband –

a princess who has become a slave.

The image of the widow is a very sympathetic image.

The widow is the object of God's protection –

and thus is rightly the object of our concern and care.

But then in verse 2 we suddenly hear that this widow weeps –

and that *among all her lovers she has none to comfort her* –

this is a very different sort of widow!

² *She weeps bitterly in the night,*

with tears on her cheeks;

among all her lovers

*she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
they have become her enemies.*

What sort of widow is this who has numerous “lovers”?

The widow throughout the scriptures is almost invariably portrayed as honorable and helpless.
But this widow is another story.

The widow is plainly Jerusalem.
Who are her numerous lovers?

The Kings of Judah had long sought to maneuver their way
between the Egyptians and the Assyrians (and later the Babylonians).
In the days Josiah – 20 years before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem –
Josiah had tried to intervene in the wars of Babylon vs. Egypt –
To no one’s surprise, it did not end well!
Josiah marched out to battle against Egypt,
but he was killed in battle against Pharaoh Neco.
And Josiah’s sons waver back and forth between Egypt and Babylon.

Partly because of this,
the kings of Judah became important pawns in the skirmishes.
They took something of a key role in the negotiations of the “minor powers” in the land of Canaan.

All these shifting alliances did not make for faithful friends.
And so even as we hear of “all her lovers”
we immediately hear how she has been betrayed –
“all her friends have dealt treacherously with her” –

Yes, it is easy to point to the sins of others
and how their guilt has brought judgment upon their own heads,
but when *your own mother* is the adulteress –
you feel a strange combination of outrage, grief, and sympathy.

I know.
Because my mother was an adulteress.
I watched as her “friends” dealt treacherously with her.
And over the years I felt outrage, grief, and sympathy
as I began to understand the tangled web that was my mother’s life.

Did she bring much of that misery upon herself and her children?
Certainly.
And you see that in verses 3-6:

³ *Judah has gone into exile because of affliction^[a]
and hard servitude;
she dwells now among the nations,
but finds no resting place;*

*her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.^[b]*

*⁴ The roads to Zion mourn,
for none come to the festival;
all her gates are desolate;
her priests groan;
her virgins have been afflicted,^[c]
and she herself suffers bitterly.*

*⁵ Her foes have become the head;
her enemies prosper,
because the LORD has afflicted her
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.*

*⁶ From the daughter of Zion
all her majesty has departed.
Her princes have become like deer
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.*

And yet while Judah's sin has brought all this affliction upon Zion,
that does not make the affliction any easier to bear!

The roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival.

Where once the joyful sounds of pilgrims echoed in the rocky paths,
now there is a mournful silence.

Where once the gates of Jerusalem resounded with the songs of ascents,
now the priests groan –
and Zion herself – Jerusalem suffers bitterly.

God had warned in Dt 28 that if his people disobeyed,
then their enemies would become the head – and Israel would become the tail.

And now that has happened.

“Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper.”

The wages of sin is death.

The exile was God's judgment against Jerusalem for her refusal to worship him –
and for her continued rebellion – and her continued trust in other nations.

But when God's judgment comes – then all the world is turned upside down.

All relationships are upended –
society itself is undone:
her priests groan,
her virgins have been afflicted,
her children have gone away (into Exile).

And that's where the lament turns in verses 7-10.

2. Jerusalem's Sin, Impurity, and Violation (v7-10)

⁷ *Jerusalem remembers
in the days of her affliction and wandering
all the precious things
that were hers from days of old.
When her people fell into the hand of the foe,
and there was none to help her,
her foes gloated over her;
they mocked at her downfall.*

⁸ *Jerusalem sinned grievously;
therefore she became filthy;
all who honored her despise her,
for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans
and turns her face away.*

⁹ *Her uncleanness was in her skirts;
she took no thought of her future;^[d]
therefore her fall is terrible;
she has no comforter.
“O LORD, behold my affliction,
for the enemy has triumphed!”*

¹⁰ *The enemy has stretched out his hands
over all her precious things;
for she has seen the nations
enter her sanctuary,
those whom you forbade
to enter your congregation.*

Verses 7-10 then describe the destruction of Jerusalem as the rape of the adulterous widow.
She had prostituted herself to the nations –
running after the gods of the nations rather than being faithful to the LORD her God –
and so a form of poetic justice comes upon her.

Let's be clear that the rape of verses 7-10 is a *metaphorical* rape.
The actual event was the Babylonian army entering the temple in Jerusalem.
But as the Gentiles enter the sanctuary – the Most Holy Place in the temple –
their penetration defiles the place where the LORD meets with his bride.

Why is God so upset about Gentiles coming into the temple?
Doesn't God *want* to bring the blessing of Abraham to the Gentiles?!

Yes!!
So that the Gentiles can *join Israel* and become part of his bride!
He wants them to become the holy dwelling place –
where they can receive his love and care –
he does *not* want them to penetrate the holy dwelling place
and defile it with their own filth.

And yet, the tone of Lamentations 1 is not primarily one of condemnation.
There is a blend of blame, horror, pity, and regret.
Jerusalem suffers as only a woman can suffer.

Indeed, you might even say that Lamentation 1 highlights this theme
because “there is no suffering worse than that of an abused woman.”

“If readers feel the self-blame and self-pity, the sympathy and disgust,
and the violence and sense of being violated, then the poet has succeeded.” (Berlin, 9)

After all, which one is it?
Did I bring this on myself?
Was it my enemies fault?
Or was it God who did this?

In the case of Jerusalem
the poet plainly says that it is a combination of all three –
but especially it is *our sin* and *God’s judgment*
that have brought these afflictions upon us.

And yet, in verse 11, the lament shifts focus to her people –
our attention turns from Zion as the faithless wife
to Zion as the afflicted mother –
and particularly to the *children* of Zion – and the groan of her people.

3. The Groan of Her Hungry People: Is There Any Sorrow Like My Sorrow? (v11-16)

(read)

¹¹ *All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they trade their treasures for food
to revive their strength.*

*“Look, O LORD, and see,
for I am despised.”*

¹² *“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
which was brought upon me,
which the LORD inflicted
on the day of his fierce anger.*

Think about that line in verse 12:
“is there any sorrow like my sorrow”?

Every city that has ever been destroyed has endured this sorrow, right?
Well, in one sense, yes.

But this was the city of God.
The city where God had made his name to dwell.
The city God had promised to bless and protect!

On top of all of the “ordinary” suffering and affliction of the devastated city,
you must add the sense of alienation and abandonment by God.

In the same way, when Jesus goes to the cross,
you have to see his suffering not merely in terms of the ordinary agony of crucifixion!
(The scriptures pay very little attention to that “ordinary” agony!)
Is there any sorrow like my sorrow?
When the eternal Son of God cries out,
‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!’

Which he endured – because he was called as the man of sorrows,
acquainted with grief, who would bear our iniquity and carry our guilt.

Verses 13-14 describe very clearly the sufferings of Zion:

*¹³ “From on high he sent fire;
into my bones^[e] he made it descend;
he spread a net for my feet;
he turned me back;
he has left me stunned,
faint all the day long.
¹⁴ “My transgressions were bound^[f] into a yoke;
by his hand they were fastened together;
they were set upon my neck;
he caused my strength to fail;
the Lord gave me into the hands
of those whom I cannot withstand.*

Fire, net, yoke.

I am helpless before the judgment of God.
I cannot withstand the affliction and suffering that he sends.

*¹⁵ “The Lord rejected
all my mighty men in my midst;
he summoned an assembly against me
to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a winepress
the virgin daughter of Judah.*

“the virgin daughter of Judah” –

The phrase “daughter of Zion” or “virgin daughter of Judah”
could better translated, perhaps as “Lady Zion” or “Sweet maiden Judah.”
After all, who is the “virgin daughter of Judah?!”

In the ancient world, the gods of the nations all had their consorts.
Baal and Tanit – Anu and Asherah – Zeus and Hera.
So who is the consort of Yahweh?!
Zion – the city of God – the people of God.

It is particularly interesting, then, to find Lamentations refer to *Judah*
as the “virgin daughter” –
the maiden who is ready for marriage.
Because Judah is a man’s name!

Many of the prophets are more careful with gender.
They refer to Judah and Israel in the masculine as sons.
And Zion and Jerusalem in the feminine as daughter or as mother of God’s people
(because cities are *always* feminine in Hebrew –
whereas tribes and nations are masculine –
since they derive their names from the male ancestors).

But Jeremiah and Lamentations are particularly notorious for gender-bending!
Because, as C. S. Lewis notes so well,
in relationship to God, *all of us* are feminine.

It’s important to distinguish between gender and sex.
With respect to biological *sex*
God is not *male* – except in Jesus Christ, who came as a *man*.
Rather, God is *masculine*.
His city – Jerusalem – his people (the church) is feminine.

Paul will say in Galatians 4 that the Jerusalem above is *our mother*.
Likewise, Revelation 12 speaks of the woman who gave birth to Jesus
and to all of God’s children – again referring to the heavenly Zion
(whom we see in all her glory in Revelation 21-22 as the bride).

This is why John Calvin will agree with Cyprian (3rd century)
that unless you have the church as your mother,
you cannot have God as your father!

In verse 16, Zion concludes in tears:

¹⁶ “*For these things I weep;
my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me,
one to revive my spirit;
my children are desolate,
for the enemy has prevailed.*”

And in response, the final section agrees:

4. “There Is None to Comfort”: The Righteous Judgment of God (v17-22)

¹⁷ *Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is none to comfort her;
the LORD has commanded against Jacob
that his neighbors should be his foes;
Jerusalem has become
a filthy thing among them.*

And so Zion acknowledges:

¹⁸ *“The LORD is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his word;
but hear, all you peoples,
and see my suffering;
my young women and my young men
have gone into captivity.*

¹⁹ *“I called to my lovers,
but they deceived me;
my priests and elders
perished in the city,
while they sought food
to revive their strength.*

²⁰ *“Look, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my stomach churns;
my heart is wrung within me,
because I have been very rebellious.
In the street the sword bereaves;
in the house it is like death.*

Notice that here at the end of the lament,
Zion confesses her sin.

“I have been very rebellious”

Clement of Alexandria reminds us that

“we, too, who in our lives are sick with shameful lusts and reprehensible excesses...
need the Savior.

And he administers not only mild but also stringent medicines.

The bitter roots of fear then arrest the eating sores of our sins.

This is why fear is also salutary, if bitter.

Sick, we truly stand in need of the Savior;

having wandered, of one to guide us;

blind, of one to lead us to the light;

thirsty, of the fountain of life, of which whoever partakes shall no longer thirst;

dead, we need life;

sheep, we need a shepherd;

we who are children need a tutor,

while universal humanity stands in need of Jesus;

so that we may not continue intractable and sinners to the end...” (276)

But having confessed her sin,
Zion also asks God to make things right!

²¹ “They heard^[g] my groaning,
yet there is no one to comfort me.
All my enemies have heard of my trouble;
they are glad that you have done it.
You have brought^[h] the day you announced;
now let them be as I am.

²² “Let all their evildoing come before you,
and deal with them
as you have dealt with me
because of all my transgressions;
for my groans are many,
and my heart is faint.”

This is the prayer of the church –
The prayer of the afflicted one.

Paul says that the Jerusalem above is "our mother" (Galatians 4:26).

This borrows from the language of the prophets,
who often speak of Jerusalem/Zion as the mother of God's people.
The problem, of course, is that the *earthly* Jerusalem rebels
and refuses to be faithful to her divine husband.

And so we need a heavenly Jerusalem –
a city whose foundations are built by God, and not by human hands -- to be our mother.

And this is what we see in Revelation 12,
where we see our heavenly mother protected by God from all assaults.

And so having suffered for a little while –
the people of God cry out for vindication!

As you have dealt with me, so may you deal with them!

Hopefully God will convert them as he has converted us!
But if not, may he destroy them!

If we are going to pray “thy kingdom come” –
then we must pray that *everything* that opposes Christ and his kingdom would be overthrown!