

Introduction to Lamentations

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Authorship, Date, Place in the Canon

Aptly named, the book of Lamentations is five poetic laments over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. This event took place in 587 BCE, which would give a composition date of late sixth century BCE. In the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations is included in the Writings, the final section of the canon; correspondingly, the early rabbis considered the book to be anonymous. Soon, however, the book became associated with Jeremiah. In some rabbinic sources, it is referred to as "The Lamentations of Jeremiah." The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, grouped the book along with Jeremiah, moving it from the Writings to the Prophets; English translators followed this sequence. In the Hebrew Bible, it is one of the five Festal Scrolls, each of which is associated with a major Jewish Festival. Lamentations is read during the Ninth of Av (Av is a month in the Hebrew calendar), which commemorates the destruction of the Temple.

Genre and Form

The book is notable for its form. Each poem has 22 verses (or in one case, a multiple of 22), corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Poems 1-4 are acrostics, that is, poems in which the first letter of each line follow a pattern. In poems 1, 2, and 4, each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet; in poem 3, three consecutive verses begin with each successive letter.

Content and Theology

Like the Psalms of lament, the poems in lamentations express grief, both individual and corporate. The destruction of the Temple was the greatest crisis faced by the Jews of that generation; Lamentations gives voice to the sorrow, pain, and fear of that event (including, like the psalms, pleas for justice and even revenge). As does the Hebrew Bible in general, the poems affirm God's sovereignty and call the people to repentance. Ultimately, even in the wake of their greatest national tragedy, the poet finds hope for a better future, faith that God will not forget God's people: "For the Lord will not reject forever./ Although he causes grief, he will have compassion/ according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." (3:31-33). Lamentations is also the scriptural basis for the refrain of the great hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness": "his mercies never come to an end;/ they are new every morning" 3:22-23).

Introduction to Jeremiah

Political Background

By the time Jeremiah begins his prophetic career (627 BCE), the Northern Kingdom of Israel has not existed for almost 100 years. The Southern Kingdom of Judah is all that remains of God's people; and during Jeremiah's lifetime, Judah is a vassal state of either Egypt or Babylon (mostly the latter), constantly paying heavy tributes to its overlord. Babylonian dominance eventually leads to three deportations of the people, the first in 597 BCE; it is to these exiles that the letter in Jeremiah 29 is written. Ten years later, the Babylonians destroy the Temple and deport a much larger group of people, including King Zedekiah, who is forced to watch the murder of his sons and his nobles; then he is blinded and taken to Babylon in chains.

The Prophet and His Career

Jeremiah is from a priestly family in Anathoth, a town about three miles north of Jerusalem. His prophetic career lasts some 40 years, beginning in the thirteenth year of King Josiah (1:2, 627 BCE) and lasting till after the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE. He does not marry or have children; his life is devoted to speaking the word of YHWH. By volume, or word count, Jeremiah is the longest book not only among the prophets but in the entire Hebrew Bible; Jeremiah also gives us the most autobiographical narrative of any prophet.

Jeremiah witnesses and works during the greatest decline in the history of Judah. Jeremiah's early years are marked by political stability, the (re)discovery of the Book of the Law in the Temple (622 BCE), and the sweeping religious reform initiated by King Josiah. By the end of Jeremiah's prophetic career, Judah has fallen, the Temple has been destroyed, and the blind, childless king has been taken into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah is offered the opportunity to go to Babylon, with the promise of good treatment, but he chooses to remain with the poor of the land (those who remained after most people had been killed or deported; see ch 39).

Call

As do the other major prophets (Isaiah and Ezekiel), Jeremiah narrates his calling by YHWH (ch 1). The LORD's words include the touching assurance that before Jeremiah was formed in the womb, God "knew" (read "cared for") him; and before Jeremiah was born, God had consecrated and appointed him as a prophet. Like Moses, Jeremiah questions whether he is the right person for the job, saying that he lacks both age and eloquence; but as with Moses, the LORD declares, "I will be with you." Then, Jeremiah says, "the LORD touched my mouth." Just as the actions of the prophet often have symbolic meaning, this action by God symbolizes the putting of God's words into the mouth of the prophet.

Because of the many trials and sufferings Jeremiah endures (see the next section), he sometimes doubts, or questions, his call—and for that matter, he questions, even impugns, God (see especially 20:7-9). He accuses God of "enticing" him, which seems to suggest that God made some promises which haven't been kept. He also says that God "overpowered" him—Eugene Peterson (in *The Message*) paraphrases, "You pushed me into this"; another apt paraphrase might be, "You bullied me into this." Undoubtedly part of Jeremiah's frustration was how often his message was ignored, contradicted, or ridiculed. Between that rejection and his other sufferings, he describes having moments when he decides to quit, to abandon his prophetic career. But in the end, he cannot escape his call: "If I say, 'I will not mention him/ or speak any more in his name,'/ then within me there is something like a burning fire/ shut up in my bones;/ I am weary with holding it in,/ and I cannot."

Sufferings

Known as "the weeping prophet" and "the suffering prophet," Jeremiah endures great pain and constant struggle. He is commanded (in ch 16) to perform two prophetic actions which are particularly painful. The first is not to marry, which obviously carries with it the inability to have descendants. He is also commanded to not to participate in any marriage feasts nor any of the rituals related to mourning. These actions symbolize the impending conquest and exile, when there will be no marriages to celebrate and no time to mourn the dead. The message is plain enough, but the effect on Jeremiah is to isolate him from the community, its people, and its most important events. Because he condemns corruption in priesthood, Jeremiah is banned from the Temple. When he calls the nation to repent, the king (Jehoiakim) burns his scroll, adding public humiliation to the rejection of his message. At various times, Jeremiah is arrested, put in stocks, ridiculed, threatened, left in an abandoned cistern; his enemies actually plan his death, though those plans don't come to fruition. Not surprisingly, then, scattered throughout the book are prayers and poems of lament, which include both Jeremiah's personal sorrows and his sorrow on behalf of his people for their lack of faithfulness to YHWH.

Prophetic Actions

- While the prophets proclaim YHWH's message mostly with their words, Jeremiah is one of the prophets remembered for prophetic actions (symbolic actions which convey a message). As mentioned above, Jeremiah is commanded not marry, nor even to participate in weddings or funerals, all portents of the coming exile (ch 16).
- In Jeremiah 19, the prophet goes to the Potsherd Gate (which would be bustling with people) and shatters a clay pot, signifying the shattering and scattering which will come upon the people.

- In chapter 27, God sends Jeremiah to the king wearing a yoke (like oxen would wear) as a sign that the people will bear the yoke of Babylon when they are conquered; and when Jeremiah's rival, Hananiah, breaks the wooden yoke, Jeremiah returns wearing an iron one, signifying that the sovereign message of YHWH cannot be changed.
- When the Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem, however, Jeremiah performs a prophetic action with a very different message: he buys a piece of land, even though the conquering army is literally just outside of Jerusalem. The message is that one day YHWH will restore the land—and the Temple.

The Adaptability of the Prophet and the Nature of YHWH

In the overview of Hebrew prophecy, we talked about how the prophets adapt their message to the changing circumstances and needs of the people. Jeremiah's purchase of land is a prime example of this trait. For decades, he has urged the people to repent, underscored by severe warnings of disaster. Once the disaster arrives, however, what the people need is a message of hope, a reminder that YHWH will not abandon them, and Jeremiah delivers precisely that message.

This shift in the prophet's message, of course, reflects the nature of YHWH. It reflects:

- YHWH's sovereignty over people. The sovereign God is entitled to call the people to repentance when they disobey, just as God is entitled to offer hope in the midst of crisis.
- YHWH's sovereignty over nations and history. Because God is sovereign over all nations, God can use Babylon to chasten Israel. Because God is sovereign over history, God's plan for Israel—expressed through the covenant with Abraham, the law of Moses, and kingship of David—will be fulfilled in God's time.
- YHWH's mercy. Like the prophets in general, Jeremiah reflects the Reward and Retribution (R & R) theology which dominates the Old Testament. This view says that God rewards (in this life) faithfulness and obedience, and God punishes (in this life) unfaithfulness and disobedience. R & R is mitigated in the later writings of the Old Testament—and set aside entirely by Jesus—but it is one of the major theological frameworks for the prophets, including Jeremiah. But like the other prophets, Jeremiah insists that the chastening of YHWH *is always redemptive*; that is, it has as its purpose to bring the people back to God. For example, in 3:6-4:4, Jeremiah uses the word "return" (or "repent," *shuv* in Hebrew) 16 times! Most of all, YHWH's mercy is evidenced by tenacious love: in spite of persistent unfaithfulness by the people, YHWH refuses to abandon Israel or the covenant.

Innovative Theology

As the previous section suggests, the theology of Jeremiah is in some ways very traditional, particularly his assertion that God is completely sovereign. In other ways, however, Jeremiah's theology is innovative. He has an unusual emphasis on YHWH's love for Judah. Especially with his image of Judah as the bride of YHWH (ch 2), the prophet recalls the tender portrait of the LORD in Hosea. The "return sermon" in 3:6-4:4 is an impassioned plea for the people to return to YHWH. In his visit to the potter's house (ch 18), Jeremiah says that just as the potter can take a damaged vessel and make it useful, or whole, so YHWH longs to reshape and restore the people from their brokenness. In his letter to the exiles in chapter 29, the prophet offers the hopeful reminder that YHWH wants their lives to be complete, even in exile. He exhorts them to marry, have children, and plant gardens, all of which is part of the goodness which God desires for them. Significantly, Jeremiah challenges the commonly accepted notion that YHWH is back in the Temple in Jerusalem; rather, declares the prophet, God is where the people are, continuing to care for them and bless them.

In a time when rituals, particularly circumcision and sacrifice, were the primary emphasis of many Jewish leaders, Jeremiah insists that *God desires internal change rather than external ritual*. Jeremiah 7 says that faithfulness is better than sacrifice or ritual purity, and, strikingly, Jeremiah 4:4 that the people should circumcise, or remove the foreskins of, *their hearts*. (This

shift from the external to the internal is not completely unique to Jeremiah; these two examples parallel Hosea and Micah, respectively; but this increasing emphasis on internal change is an important contribution of the prophets.)

Another innovation in Jeremiah is a shift to a more personal responsibility, a more individual accountability. In the context of R & R, Hebrew theology for centuries assumed that the sins of individuals—particularly leaders, like kings or patriarchs—led to punishment for the group: when the king sinned, the nation suffered; when the father sinned, the family was punished; when the ancestor sinned, future generations endured negative consequences. But Jeremiah envisions a new ethic when the people are restored from exile: “In those days they shall no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes,/ and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.” (31:29-30)

For Jeremiah, these innovations, these new ways of understanding YHWH, are so important that they literally redefine the faith of the Jewish people. Judaism, as it was understood in Jeremiah’s day, was birthed, or inaugurated, when God made covenant with Abraham. But Jeremiah’s vision for the restoration of the people (after the exile) is nothing less than a *new covenant*: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

The vision is breathtaking. The law will be written not on stone tablets but on the hearts of the people. Whereas the old covenant was broken by the people, the new covenant will be joyfully obeyed. No one will need to be admonished to know the LORD, for all the people, from the greatest to the least, will be in relationship with God. And wherever transgressions or lapses might be found, they will be swallowed up in the mercy and forgiveness of God so completely that it will be as if they never happened—even YHWH will have no memory of them!

The influence of Jeremiah on Judaism can scarcely be overstated; and, from a Christian perspective, Jeremiah has turned theology and ethics in a direction which sets the stage for Jesus. In the crucible of his own impending suffering, Jesus at the Last Supper will return to the language of Jeremiah: “This is a *new covenant* in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”