

The Book of Lamentations

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, the small book which follows in our English Bible the book of Jeremiah, is placed in the portion which is called "Kethubim" (the writings). It is one of the five, so-called "Megilloth." The Septuagint translation begins with a brief paragraph which is not found in our version: "It came to pass that, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem was made desolate, Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said ...;" then the first chapter begins. The Vulgate (Latin) translation has adopted this statement and also the Arabic version.

There can be no question that Jeremiah is the inspired author of these outbursts of grief, as well as confession of sin and dependence on Jehovah. Yet this has not only been seriously questioned, but positively denied. Critics claim that probably chapters 2 and 4 must have been written by an eye-witness of Judah's conquest; they deny that it was Jeremiah and think it must have been one of the exiles. The claim is made because it appears to them that these two chapters lean strongly on Ezekiel and parts, they say, must have been copied after Ezekiel's writings. The other chapters, they say, are much later. Critics like Budde and Cheyne put the third chapter in the pre-Maccabean period towards the end of the third century. All is nothing but guesswork, which is proved by the different theories of these scholars, which clash with each other. To show the superficial method of these men we shall give a few of the star arguments against the Jeremianic authorship of Lamentations. They say that 4:17 could hardly have been written by Jeremiah because the writer includes himself with those who had expected help from Egypt. But the critic does not see that the prophet identifies himself with the nation, as Daniel did. Then again, they object to 4:20, because it speaks of Zedekiah in such a way as Jeremiah would never have spoken of him. But how do they know? Zedekiah was still the Lord's anointed, even as David recognized down to the sad end of Saul, the king as the Lord's anointed. Instead of being an argument against the authorship of Jeremiah, it is one for it.

Then these "literary" critics claim that the smooth and beautiful style cannot be Jeremiah's. "The whole style of these poems, though exquisitely beautiful and touching, and studded with the thoughts of the great prophet, is absolutely different to anything we find in the long roll of Jeremiah's great work. It is too artificial, too much studied, too elaborately worked out" (A.B. Davidson). If A.B. Davidson and other critics had just a little faith in divine inspiration they would not write such puerile criticism. As if the Spirit of God could not change the style and manner of the writings of one of His chosen instruments!

The Lamentations are correctly divided into five chapters in a very remarkable way. Chapters 1 and 2 consist each of twenty-two verses of three lines each. All is written in a certain meter. Each verse begins in both chapters with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. They are acrostics. The third chapter has instead of 22 verses, 66 verses, that is 3 x 22. The first three verses of this chapter begin each with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the next three with the second letter, so that in these 66 verses the Hebrew alphabet is again followed. The fourth chapter is also arranged in the same manner, acrostically, each of the 22 verses begin with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The last chapter shows no such arrangement. We doubt not that in all this there may be a hidden, a deeper meaning, which no saint of God has yet discovered.

The message of this book is extremely precious. It is a pity that so few of God's people have ever paid a closer attention to this book. Here is indeed a great mine of comfort and spiritual instruction which will prove very wholesome to all those who walk with God.

When Israel suffered in Egypt the Lord said: "I have surely seen the affliction of My people" (Exodus 3:7). Lamentations shows the same blessed fact, that Jehovah has a loving and deep

interest in the afflictions of His people through which they pass on account of their sins. He who had to chastise His people is nevertheless moved with compassion in their behalf. Yea, in their affliction He Himself is afflicted and He yearns over them. The feelings, deep emotions of sorrow and humiliation, expressed by the mouthpiece of Jehovah, Jeremiah, were produced by the Spirit of Christ, in the heart of the prophet.

"There is nothing more affecting than the sentiments produced in the heart by the conviction that the subject of affliction is beloved of God, that He loves that which He is obliged to smite, and is obliged to smite that which He loves. The prophet, while laying open the affliction of Jerusalem, acknowledges that the sin of the people had caused it. Could that diminish the sorrow of his heart? If on the one hand it was a consolation, on the other it humbled and made him hide his face. The pride of the enemy, and their joy in seeing the affliction of the beloved of God, give occasion to sue for compassion on behalf of the afflicted, and judgment on the malice of the enemy" (Synopsis of the Bible).

Prophetically we may look upon these lamentations as embodying the soul-exercise of the godly remnant of God's earthly people passing in a future day through the great tribulation. That beautiful prayer found in the last chapter will then be answered, "renew our days of old" and all the glorious promises given to Israel will then be fulfilled.

No further division of this book is needed; the division into five chapters is perfect.

CHAPTER 1 Jerusalem's Great Desolation and the Sorrow of His People

The chapter begins with an outburst of grief over Jerusalem's desolation. Once she was a populous city; now she is solitary. Once she was great among the nations, like a princess among provinces, and now she is widowed. Then in the next verse we hear her weeping; she weeps all night long; none is there to comfort her; her friends have turned against her, they have become her enemies. She was disobedient to her Lord, she rejected His Word, she gave up her holy place as His separated people and now "she findeth no rest." The Lord's hand is upon her for the multitude of her transgressions. The hopeful note we find in verses 8-11. Here is confession of her guilt and shame; here is humiliation and appeal to the Lord on account of the enemy. "See, O LORD, and behold; for I am become vile." Such humiliation and self-judgment is pleasing in the Lord's sight.

In verse 12 Jerusalem speaks: "is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of His fierce anger." The passer-by who beholds the ruins of Zion is asked to look upon the desolations and then to consider that the Lord in His righteous anger smote her, who is still His beloved. Well may we think of Him, who had to say, "See if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow," who was smitten and afflicted, upon whom Jehovah's rod rested, over whose blessed head all the waves and billows of Divine judgment-wrath rolled, He who is the Beloved, the Son of God, our Lord. Again the prophet breaks out in weeping, "His eye runneth down with water." He is deeply affected over the desolation and judgment which has taken place. But a greater One, greater than Jeremiah, stood centuries after before the same city, brought back from the ruin of Jeremiah's time. And as He beheld that city He wept, because His omniscient eye beheld a still more appalling judgment for city and nation.

Forsaken, un comforted, distressed, humiliated, sighing and crying, owning her rebellion, vindicating Jehovah and His righteousness, Jerusalem sits in the dust, "abroad the sword bereaveth, at home there is death."

CHAPTER 2 What the Lord Has Done

The great catastrophe continues in vivid description throughout this chapter also. Not an enemy has done it, not Nebuchadrezzar and his Chaldean hordes, but the Lord is the executor of all. The beauty of Israel He cast down; He swallowed up the habitations of Jacob; He burned against Jacob

like a flame; He bent His bow like an enemy; He poured out His fury like fire; He was as an enemy. These are a few of the many expressions with which the righteousness of the Lord in judging His people is acknowledged.

And what a great description of Jerusalem and her inhabitants we read in verses 8-16. Gates broken down; king and princes among the Gentiles; law abandoned; no more visions! Elders on the ground in sackcloth and ashes; virgins hanging their heads; children and sucklings swooning in the streets--and all that pass by clap their hands, hiss, and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem.

"The LORD hath done what He had devised; He hath fulfilled the Word that He had commanded in the days of old." Oh! that the people today would hear and believe that God will yet fulfill other judgment messages and deal with the world on account of its sin. The chapter ends with a prayer.

CHAPTER 3 The Prophet's Suffering and Distress

This chapter is intensely personal. None but Jeremiah could have written these wonderful expressions of sorrow, the sorrows of the people of God into which he entered so fully, in such a way that they become his own. He shared all their afflictions, bore them himself and then was hated by them. It was the Spirit of Christ who created these feelings in the heart of the prophet. In reading these words of deep distress and the words of faith and waiting for Him, we must look beyond Jeremiah and see a picture of our Lord, "the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," His sorrow and His afflictions, the emotions of His holy soul, as well as the experiences and soul exercise of the believing remnant of Israel in days to come.

The prophet speaks of himself as one who is smitten by the rod of God's wrath, the man that hath seen affliction. He had not deserved that wrath; the wrath and affliction have come upon a sinful people, but he identifies himself with them. What must have been the suffering and the affliction of our Lord when He, at the close of His blessed life, suffered and died the death of the cross! The rod of righteousness fell on Him. More than Jeremiah did, He tasted that wrath, when He who knew no sin was made sin for us. "He (God) hath bent His bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow. He hath caused the arrows of His quiver to enter into my reins. I was a derision to all my people and their song all the day" (verses 12-14). He speaks of "the wormwood and the gall" (verse 19); of the "smitten cheek filled with reproach" (verse 30).

Through such suffering Jeremiah passed as well as the godly of all ages, as well as those in the future. Jeremiah's affliction but faintly foreshadows the afflictions of the Afflicted One. But while Jeremiah suffered with Jerusalem and for Jerusalem, he was not destitute of comfort. He knew the Lord and He sustained him in his affliction. How beautifully he speaks of the mercies of the Lord, of His compassions which never fail, of the greatness of His faithfulness (verses 22, 23). Such is the comfort still of all those who know the Lord; it is the song in the night: "The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. The LORD is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him." All His saints speak thus when they feel the chastening hand of the Lord. He has full confidence in the Lord and knows "He doth not afflict willingly," and that "the LORD will not cast off for ever." And again, "though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies."

Beginning with verse 40, a real return is described. There is self-examination: "Let us search and try our ways and turn again to the LORD." This is followed by prayer: "Let us lift up our hearts with our hands unto God in the heavens." Then comes confession: "We have transgressed and have rebelled; Thou hast not pardoned." It describes prophetically the repentance of a Jewish remnant when this present age ends and the Lord is about to be manifested in visible glory. Jeremiah's lament over Jerusalem's condition and the nation's state is once more recorded in verses 45-47. "Thou hast made us an offscouring and refuse in the midst of the people. All our enemies have opened their mouths against us. Fear and snare is come upon us, desolation and destruction." Such will also be the complaint of the suffering remnant. This chapter ends with an

imprecatory prayer. "Render unto them a recompense, O LORD, according to the works of their hands. Give them sorrow of heart, thy curse unto them. Persecute and destroy them in anger from under the heavens of the LORD." It is like the imprecatory prayers in the Psalms, prayers which will be prayed when the godly in Israel suffer under their enemies in the great tribulation.

CHAPTER 4 The Departed Glory and the Cup of Shame

This new lament begins with a description of the former glory of Zion and its present wretchedness; the glory is departed:

How is the gold become dim! The most pure gold changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured forth at the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion, just like fine gold-- How are they now esteemed like earthen pitchers: the work of the potters' hands! Even the jackals draw out the breast, giving suck to their young-- The daughter of my people is become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness. The tongue of the sucking child cleaveth to the roof of his mouth for thirst. The young children ask bread, no man breaketh it unto them. They that did feel delicately are desolate in the streets. They that were brought up in scarlet embrace dung hills.

What degradation and shame! The Lord had called Zion to be like the pure gold, precious and glorious. In his beautiful parable, Ezekiel speaks thus of Jerusalem's glory: "Thus wast thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen and silk and brodered work, thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil; and thou wast exceeding beautiful, and thou didst prosper in a kingdom" (Ezekiel 16:13). The gold is become dim, the pure gold changed. Instead of the linen and silk there is sackcloth and ashes; instead of the flour, the honey, and the oil, there is want and famine. When the golden-glory departed from Zion, then the Lord revealed that Nebuchadnezzar is "the head of gold," the starting point of the times of the Gentiles. The glory had departed and Zion had to drink of shame and want to the full on account of her sins (verse 6). And what a contrast now between what the Nazarites and nobles of the nation were once and what they are now. They were purer than snow, whiter than milk, and now they are blacker than coal. They were ruddy in body; and now their skin cleaveth to their bones. What a horrible transformation sin had wrought! Sin is a robber; sin brings its wages. It robs of glory and gives nothing but suffering, shame and death. All that God had spoken long ago, the very curses generation after generation had read in the book of the law (Deut. 28:56, 57; Lev. 26:29), had come upon them. The kings of the earth, the inhabitants of the world, knew that Jerusalem was unconquerable, for the Lord of all the earth was Zion's King and Lord. What no earthly power could have done, to enter Jerusalem and spoil the city, the Lord had done, "on account of the sins of her prophets, the iniquities of her priests, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her." Jerusalem was built again. Once more after the seventy years the city was restored, the temple rebuilt. Then the just One came, the Messiah of David, the Lord of Glory. They shed the blood of the just One, and now, as verse 14 says, "They wander about blind."

And Edom! She had rejoiced at Zion's overthrow, even as Gentiles have despised Israel. But there is judgment in store for the nations, mercy for Israel, when the punishment is accomplished. "He will no more carry thee away into captivity."

CHAPTER 5 The Prayer of Hope

The lamentations end with a prayer: "Remember, O LORD, what is come upon us; consider and behold our reproach." It is the prayer of confession and of hope, which reaches the heart of the God of Israel. The prophet, in behalf of the nation, pours out his confession: "The crown is fallen from our head; woe unto us that we have sinned." And there is hope in the Lord who remaineth, whose throne is from generation to generation. The prayer, "Turn Thou us unto Thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old." (verse 21) will some day be blessedly answered. The Eightieth Psalm contains the same prayer a number of times, and there He is mentioned who will yet save His people Israel from their sins. "Let Thy hand be upon the Man of Thy right hand, upon the Son of Man whom Thou madest strong for Thyself. So will not we go back from Thee; quicken us and we will call on Thy Name. Turn us again O LORD God of hosts, cause Thy face to shine,

and we shall be saved."

"The prophet now presents in this chapter the whole affliction of the people to God, as an object of compassion and mercy. This is an onward step in the path of these deep exercises of heart. He is at peace with God; he is in His presence; it is no longer a heart struggling with inward misery. All is confessed before Jehovah, who is faithful to His people, so that he can call on God to consider the affliction in order that He may remember His suffering people according to the greatness of His compassions. For Jehovah changes not (5:19-21). The sense of the affliction remains in full, but God is brought in, and everything having been recalled and judged before Him, all that had happened being cleared up to the heart, Jeremiah can rest in the proper and eternal relations between God and His beloved people; and, shutting himself into his direct relations with his God, he avails himself of His goodness, as being in those relations, to find in the affliction of the beloved people an opportunity for calling His attention to them. This is the true position of faith--that which it attains as the result of its exercises before God at the sight of the affliction of His people (an affliction so much the deeper from its being caused by sin).

"This book of Lamentations is remarkable because we see in it the expression of the thoughts of the Spirit of God, that is, those produced in persons under His influence, the vessels of His testimony, when God was forced to set aside that which He had established in the world as His own. There is nothing similar in the whole circle of the revelations and of the affections of God. He says himself, How could He treat them as Admah and Zeboim? Christ went through it in its fullest extent. But He went through it in His own perfection with God. He acted thus with regard to Jerusalem, and wept over it. But here man is found to have lost the hope of God interposing on His people's behalf God would not abandon a man who was one of this people, who loved them, who understood that God loved them, that they were the object of His affection. He was one of them. How could he bear the idea that God had cast them off? No doubt God would re-establish them. But in the place where God had set them all hope was lost forever. In the Lord's own presence it is never lost. It is in view of this that all these exercises of heart are gone through, until the heart can fully enter into the mind and affections of God Himself indeed, this is always true.

"The Spirit gives us here a picture of all these exercises. How gracious! To see the Spirit of God enter into all these details, not only of the ways of God, but of that also which passes through a heart in which the judgment of God is felt by grace, until all is set right in the presence of God Himself. Inspiration gives us not only the perfect thoughts of God, and Christ the perfection of man before God, but also all the exercises produced in our poor hearts, when the perfect Spirit acts in them, so far as these thoughts, all mingled as they are, refer in the main to God, or are produced by Him. So truly cares He for us! He hearkens to our sighs, although much of imperfection and of that which belongs to our own heart is mixed with them. It is this that we see in the book of Lamentations, in the Psalms, and elsewhere, and abundantly, though in another manner, in the New Testament" (Synopsis of the Bible).