

FIRST LAMENT

Jerusalem is bereft

This lamentation is acrostic. Each stanza consists of three lines (with a break in the middle of each line). The first word in the first line of verse 1 (and only the first line) begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of the first line of verse 2 (and only the first line) begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and so 22 verses (66 lines) in the lament. As with acrostic psalms, the literary form emphasises the all-encompassing nature of the experience (in this case bewilderment and grief).

1. A dirge bemoaning the dreadful state of the city (1:1-6)

[א] [’ālep]

**¹Ah, how lonely lies the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was once great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has been subjected to forced labour.**

The lament begins with the mournful cry ’êkâ [הָיָה אֵי]. Then, typical of a dirge, follows a description that contrasts the way things were to the way things now are as a consequence of the ‘death’ of the city. Compare the following laments:

They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury them.

– Psalm 79:3

You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.

– Psalm 80:5

Why have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

– Psalm 80:12

If I go out into the field, look—those killed by the sword!
And if I enter the city, look—those sick with famine!

– Jeremiah 14:18

Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation.
Our holy and beautiful house where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

– Isaiah 64:10-11

Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease,
for the virgin daughter—my people—is struck down with a crushing blow,
with a very grievous wound.

– Jeremiah 14:17

[ב] [bēt]

**²She weeps bitterly in the night,
tears running down her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her neighbours have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.**

The theme of weeping recurs (see 2:18; 3:48-52). Compare the Psalmist:

I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief.

– Psalm 6:6-7

Jeremiah, too, focuses on the weeping (see 14:17 on the previous page). Jerusalem is portrayed here as to be pitied. This is the first of many references in the lament to Jerusalem's isolation. There is no one to 'comfort' her [Hebrew נִחַם, niḥam]. One recalls the opening words of the writings of the Isaiah School as they saw the approaching end of the exile: 'Comfort, comfort my people' (Isaiah 40:1).

'Lovers' is a reference to the countries to whom Judah turned instead of turning to YHWH. Jerusalem is suffering because of her infidelity to the covenant she had with her God. Furthermore, her neighbours (especially Edom – see the prophecy of Obadiah and Psalm 137:7) took advantage of her weakness and sided with Babylon.

[ג] [gîmel]

**³Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no rest;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.**

'Rest' can be found only in communion with her God.

[ד] [dālet]

**⁴The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are broken down,
her priests groan;
her young women grieve,
her lot is bitter.**

After the snapshot of the condition of the city (compare the cry of Psalm 80:12 on the previous page), we are invited to witness the suffering of the inhabitants of the city, beginning with the priests and the young women, who had a significant role in festival celebrations (see Jeremiah 31:13; Judges 21:19-21).

The downfall and disgrace of the city

[ח] [hē]

**⁵Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because YHWH has made her suffer
for the multitude of her rebellions;**

For the first time in the lament, YHWH is named as the one responsible for the disaster. This was unavoidable in a culture that did not question the assumption that everything that happens is caused ultimately by God. And, since YHWH is just, by definition, the reason for the ‘punishment’ had to be the people’s infidelity to the covenant: ‘the multitude of her rebellions’. This acknowledgment of guilt interrupts the direct complaint.

**her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.**

[ו] [wāw]

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

The expression ‘daughter Zion’ occurs seven times in Lamentations. It reinforces the personification of the city, and also serves a metrical purpose.

2. The downfall and disgrace of the city (1:7-9a)

[י] [zayin]

**⁷Jerusalem remembers,
in the days of her affliction and wandering ...
How her people fell into the hand of the foe,
and there was no one to help her,
the foe looked on mocking
over her downfall.**

Where there is ‘...’ in the above text, the Hebrew has ‘all the precious things she had in olden times’. I am following those scholars who delete this as a comment that has mistakenly found its way into the text, since it overloads the stanza. Westermann (*Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark 1994) relocates it to verse six. Compare Psalm 44:13-16

You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,
the derision and scorn of those around us.
You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.
All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face
at the words of the taunters and revilers,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.

[ר] [ḥēṭ]

For the second time sin is acknowledged as the cause of the disaster (see verse 5).

**⁸Jerusalem sinned grievously,
so she has become an object of derision;
all who honoured her came to despise her,
for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans,
and turns her face away.**

Stripping was part of the punishment meted out to prostitutes (see Ezekiel 16:35-39; 23:29; Isaiah 3:17).

[צ] [ṭēṭ]

⁹Her uncleanness clings to her skirts;

The reference is to menstrual blood. The issuing of blood from the place that is designed to issue in life excluded a woman from public assembly and cult.

she took no thought for her future;

That is, the people failed to take notice of the warnings of the prophets (notably Jeremiah).

**her downfall was appalling,
with none to comfort her.**

3. A plea for YHWH to observe their grievous situation (1:9c-11)

**^{9c} "YHWH, look at my affliction,
see how the enemy has triumphed!"**

Westermann writes: 'The transition from lament to plea is the most important feature of the psalm of lamentation' (page 130). The 'my' here is Jerusalem. See also the last line in verse 11.

[י] [yōd]

**¹⁰Enemies have stretched out their hands
towards all her precious things;
she has even seen the nations
invade her sanctuary,
those whom you forbade
to enter your congregation.**

Compare the lament of the Psalmist:

O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.

– Psalm 79:1

As regards the author of this lamentation, it seems highly unlikely that Jeremiah would have composed verse 10. He saw the destruction of the city and its temple as carried out by the Babylonian army acting as God's instruments and on God's instructions.

[כ] [kap]

**¹¹All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they trade their treasures for food
to revive their strength.
Look, YHWH, and see
how worthless I have become.**

Compare Jeremiah 14:18

If I go out into the field, look—those killed by the sword!
And if I enter the city, look—those sick with famine!

4. A fervent lament directed to YHWH who brought about the destruction, begging him to intervene (1:12-18a)

[לָ] [lāmed]

**¹²Is 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.
It is YHWH who inflicted this upon me
on the day of his fierce anger.**

This is the 'day of YHWH' The 'day' of God's judgment.

[מָ] [mēm]

**¹³From on high he sent fire;
it went deep into my bones;
he spread a net for my feet;
he dragged me back;
he has left me stunned,
faint all day long.**

[נָ] [nûn]

This is the third acknowledgment of sin (see verses 5 and 8-9).

**¹⁴Heavy is the yoke of my transgressions
laid upon me by his hand
they weigh on my neck,
sapping my strength;
the Lord handed me over
to those whom I could not withstand.**

'The Lord' [יְהוָה, 'adōnāy] occurs fourteen times in Lamentations. YHWH [יהוה] occurs thirty-two times.

[כ] [sāmek]

**15The Lord has rejected
 all my warriors in the midst of me;
 he ordered a battle against me
 to annihilate my young warriors;
 the Lord has trodden the wine press,
 the virgin daughter Judah.**

In commenting on 1:6 we noted that ‘daughter Zion’ occurs seven times in Lamentations. This is the only occurrence of ‘virgin daughter Judah’(but see ‘virgin daughter Zion’, Song 2:13.18). On treading the wine press, compare Isaiah 63:1-6.

[כז] [‘ayin]

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

[כח] [pēh]

**17Zion stretches out her hands,
 but there is no one to comfort her;
 YHWH has commanded against Jacob
 that his neighbours should become his foes;
 Jerusalem has become
 an object of loathing in their eyes.**

[כט] [šādēh]

**18YHWH is in the right,
 for I have rebelled against his word;**

The people continue to acknowledge the justice of God. However, this does not remove their bewilderment.

This is the fourth acknowledgment of sin (see verses 5, 8-9, 14). In similar vein, Isaiah 43:22-28

You did not call upon me, O Jacob;
 but you have been weary of me, O Israel! ...
 But you have burdened me with your sins;
 you have wearied me with your iniquities
 I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
 and I will not remember your sins. Accuse me, let us go to trial;
 set forth your case, so that you may be proved right.
 Your first ancestor sinned,
 and your interpreters transgressed against me.
 Therefore I profaned the princes of the sanctuary,
 I delivered Jacob to utter destruction, and Israel to reviling.

A plea for God to notice

5. A lament, pleading for YHWH to hear (1:18b-21a)

^{18b}**Hear, all you peoples,
and behold my suffering;
my young women and young men
have gone into captivity.**

[כ] [kōp]

¹⁹**I called to my lovers
but they left me in the lurch;
my priests and elders
perished in the city
while seeking food
to revive their strength.**

[ר] [rēš]

²⁰**See, YHWH, how distressed I am;
my stomach churns,
my heart is in agony within me,
because I have been very rebellious.
In the street the sword bereaves;
in the house it is like death.**

[ש] [šin]

²¹**Listen to how I groan,
with no one to comfort me.**

6. A cry that enemies will suffer the consequences of their actions (1:21c-22)
God is just. Surely, he will punish Judah's enemies, for they, too, have sinned.

^{21b}**All my enemies heard of my trouble;
they are glad that you have done it.
Bring on the day you have announced,
and let them be as I am.**

[ת] [taw]

²²**Let all their evil doing 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.**

Compare Psalm 79:12.

Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbours
the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord!