

SECOND LAMENT

The fierce anger of YHWH

This lamentation, like the previous one is acrostic, and it has the same structure. 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. It is YHWH who is responsible for the disastrous destruction of Jerusalem (2:1-9a).

On the underlying assumption that God controls events, and so must have willed the destruction of Jerusalem, see the Introduction pages 70-72. Since the effect of God's will is so terrible, the assumption is that God is angry with the city and its people. This must be because of their infidelity to the covenant. Like Lamentation 1, the lament opens with the mournful cry 'êkâ [אֵכָא].

[א] [’ālep]

**¹Ah, how YHWH in his anger
has humiliated daughter Zion!**

The word ‘anger’[אָפּ, ’ap] draws attention to the features of a person who is giving vent to anger. It is used of God once in the First Lament (see 1:12). Here in the Second Lament, with its focus on the horrors of the catastrophe that has come upon Jerusalem and its constant assertion that it is God who has willed it, God's ‘anger’ is accented again in verse 3 and in verses 21-22. In verse 2 the word ‘wrath’[עֵבְרָה, ‘ebrāh] is used. The Hebrew has the nuance of a person being ‘overwrought’, going ‘over the top’. In verse 4 we find the word ‘fury’[חֲמָה, ḥamāh], highlighting the ‘heat’ of the anger. Then in verse 6 we have ‘indignation’[זַעַם, zā’am], underlining the fact that God's anger is a sanction brought on people by their actions.

Every word we use to describe God is used by analogy with what we know from our human experience. Since it was their understanding that it was God who brought on them the terrible catastrophe described in this lament, they understood that God must be angry with them.

**He has thrown down from heaven to earth
the glory of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
on the day of his anger.**

On the use of the expression ‘daughter Zion’ see the comment on 1:6. God dwells in heaven, but his ‘feet’ touch the earth in Jerusalem.

[ב] [bēt]

**²YHWH has destroyed without mercy
 all the dwellings of Jacob;
 in his wrath he has broken down
 the strongholds of daughter Judah;
 he has brought down to the ground in dishonour
 the kingdom and its rulers.**

The expression ‘daughter Judah’ is found also in verse 5. For the only use of ‘virgin daughter Judah’ see 1:15.

[ג] [gîmel]

**³He has cut down in fierce anger
 all the might of Israel;
 he has withdrawn his right hand from them
 in the face of the enemy;
 he has raged like a flaming fire in Jacob,
 consuming all around.**

[ד] [dālet]

**⁴He has bent his bow like an enemy,
 with his right hand set.
 Like a foe, he has killed
 all in whom we took pride.
 On the tent of daughter Zion;
 he has poured out his fury like fire.**

[ה] [hē]

**⁵YHWH has become like an enemy;
 he has destroyed Israel;
 He has destroyed all its palaces,
 laid in ruins its strongholds,
 and heaped up in daughter Judah
 mourning and lamentation.**

[ו] [wāw]

**⁶He has broken down his booth like a garden,
 he has destroyed his tabernacle;
 YHWH has put an end in Zion
 to festival and sabbath,
 and in his fierce indignation has spurned
 king and priest.**

[ז] [zayin]

**⁷YHWH has scorned his altar,
disowned his sanctuary;
he has delivered into the hand of the enemy
the walls of her palaces;
a clamour was raised in the house of YHWH
as on a day of festival.**

[ח] [hēt]

**⁸YHWH determined to lay in ruins
the walls of daughter Zion;
he stretched out the line;
he did not withhold his hand from destroying;
he caused rampart and wall to lament;
they collapsed together.**

[ט] [tēt]

**⁹Her gates have sunk into the ground;
he has ruined and broken her bars.**

2. The people who have lived through the calamity bemoan their suffering (2:9b-13)

**^{9b}Her king and her princes are among the nations;
guidance is no more,
and her prophets obtain
no vision from YHWH.**

[י] [yōd]

**¹⁰The elders of daughter Zion
sit on the ground in silence;
they have thrown dust on their heads
and put on sackcloth;
the young women of Jerusalem
have bowed their heads to the ground.**

[כ] [kap]

**¹¹My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out on the ground
because of the destruction of my people,
because infants and babes faint
in the streets of the city.**

The theology that connects suffering with punishment for sin collapses when ‘infants and babes’ suffer. This is part of the overwhelming bewilderment at the outrages that God has brought upon the city. How is such a thing possible?

[לָ] [lāmed]

**¹²They cry to their mothers,
 “Where is bread and wine?”
 as they faint like the wounded
 in the streets of the city,
 as they breathe their last breath
 on their mothers’ bosom.**

[מֵ] [mēm]

**¹³What can I say for you, to what compare you,
 O daughter Jerusalem?
 To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you,
 O virgin daughter Zion?
 For vast as the sea is your ruin;
 who can heal you?**

This is the only occurrence of the expression ‘virgin daughter Zion’ in Lamentations (see comment on 1:6).

3. A complaint against those within Jerusalem who failed in their duty, and against Jerusalem’s enemies (2:14-17)

[נִ] [nîn]

**¹⁴Your prophets have announced to you
 false and deceptive visions;
 they have not exposed your iniquity
 to avert your fate,
 but have seen oracles for you
 that are false and misleading.**

In the second half of line one ‘deceptive’ translates the Hebrew ‘whitewash’. This is an image used powerfully by Ezekiel 13:10-16. As noted in the Introduction (page 72) the prophets looked at events at two levels. There is the level of human cause and effect – which is seen here in verse 14. The failure of the prophets brought on the catastrophe. Transcending this is the level of divine purpose - which is the central focus of this Second Lament. It is God who had determined the catastrophe. In their desperation to find some meaning in what has befallen them they reflect on the failure of their so-called ‘prophets’. Here we are close to the critique that we find throughout the prophecies of Jeremiah (see especially Jeremiah 23:25ff). Jeremiah was ignored till the fall of Jerusalem proved him right.

The arrogance of the enemy

[ס] [sāmek]

**¹⁵All who pass along the way
clap their hands at you;
they hiss and wag their heads
at daughter Jerusalem;
“Is this the city that was called
the perfection of beauty,
[the joy of all the earth?”]**

‘The perfection of beauty’(see Psalm 50:2). ‘The joy of all the earth’(see Psalm 48:2; Jeremiah 51:41) overloads the metre. It appears to be a marginal note (a ‘gloss’) that has found its way into the text.

[פ] [pēh]

Here and in Lamentations 3 and 4 pēh comes before ‘ayin, which is the reverse of the order in the Hebrew alphabet.

**¹⁶All your enemies
open their mouths against you;
they hiss, they gnash their teeth,
they cry: “We have devoured her!
Ah, this is the day we longed for;
at last we have seen it!”**

The Psalmist complains:

We have become a taunt to our neighbours,
mocked and derided by those around us.

– Psalm 79:4

[ע] [‘ayin]

**¹⁷YHWH has done what he purposed,
he has carried out his threat;
as he ordained long ago,
he has demolished without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you,
and exalted the might of your foes.**

Verse 17 witnesses to the radical shift in understanding brought about by the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Before that the general view was that YHWH could not allow his city and his temple to be destroyed (see, for example, Jeremiah 7). This view was reinforced in 701 when Sennacherib devastated Judah but had to withdraw from the siege of Jerusalem. The catastrophe forced them to let go this idea, but it left them bewildered.

4. Pour out your heart before YHWH (2:18-19)

[ס] [sādēh]

**¹⁸Cry aloud to the Lord!
 O virgin daughter Zion!
 Let tears stream down like a torrent
 day and night!
 Give yourself no rest,
 your eyes no respite!**

[כ] [kōp]

**¹⁹Arise, cry out in the night,
 at the beginning of the watch!
 Pour out your heart like water
 before the presence of the Lord!
 Lift your hands to him
 for the lives of your children,
 [who faint for hunger
 at the head of every street].**

These last two half-lines overload the text. They appear to be a marginal comment that has found its way into the text. The call echoes Psalm 62:8.

Trust in him at all times, O people;
 pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.

In spite of everything they are urging each other on to continue to cry out to their God. There must still be hope. They mustn't stop crying out now.

5. A plea to God to heed their cry (2:20-22).

[ר] [rēš]

Here the lament becomes a prayer. They are desperately pleading with God for an explanation of his behaviour towards them.

**²⁰Look, YHWH, and consider!
 To whom have you done this?
 Should women eat their offspring,
 the children they have borne?
 Should priest and prophet be killed
 in the sanctuary of the Lord?**

[ש] [šin]

**²¹The young and the old are lying
 on the ground in the streets;
 my young women and my young men
 have fallen by the sword;
 in the day of your anger you have killed them,
 slaughtering without mercy.**

Isaiah, too, compares the day of God's anger to a banquet at which people are slaughtered like animals for sacrifice (see Isaiah 34:1-6; compare Jeremiah 12:3).

Terror from all around

[ר] [taw]

**²²You invited terror from all around
as if for a day of festival;
and on the day of the anger of YHWH
no one escaped or survived;
those whom I bore and reared
my enemy has destroyed.**

The expression 'terror from all around' is a favorite expression of Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29. This may point to Jeremiah as the author of this Second Lamentation. Either that or the author is consciously echoing Jeremiah.