

# **THIRD LAMENT**

## A personal lament

This lamentation, like the previous ones, is acrostic. Its structure is different in that each stanza still consists of three lines, but the first word of each line (not just of the first line) of the first stanza begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of each line of the second stanza begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and so 66 lines (with a break in the middle of each line) in the lament. As with acrostic psalms, the literary form emphasises the all-encompassing nature of the experience (in this case bewilderment and grief). Unlike the other laments, this is not directly connected with the fall of Jerusalem. It appears to be a post-exilic addition that offers a more general focus for lament. The accent is on personal suffering, personal sin, and personal conversion.

Unit One: A personal psalm of lament (3:1-25)

[א] [’ālep]

**<sup>1</sup>I am a man who has seen affliction  
under the rod of God’s wrath;**

The ‘I’ here in verse 1 is a man [גִּבּוֹר, geber]. This does not fit with it being a personification of Zion (always female in the other laments). The ‘I’ stands for ‘everyman’. It is the cry of any individual sufferer.

The author goes on to recount his suffering. He speaks of God as the one responsible. One can find parallels in the psalms of lament and in the complaints found in Job and Jeremiah. We are witnessing personal sorrow, as distinct from the sorrow of the survivors in Jerusalem that we hear in the first, second and fourth laments.

**<sup>2</sup>he has driven me and brought me  
into darkness without any light;  
<sup>3</sup>against me he turns his hand,  
again and again, day after day.**

[ב] [bēt]

**<sup>4</sup>He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
and broken my bones;**

The Psalmist pleads:

Let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

– Psalm 51:8

**<sup>5</sup>he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;  
<sup>6</sup>he has made me sit in thick darkness  
like those long dead.**

The Psalmist laments:

The enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground,  
making me sit in darkness like those long dead.

– Psalm 143:3

[ג] [gîmel]

**<sup>7</sup>He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;  
 he has put heavy chains on me;  
<sup>8</sup>though I call and cry for help,  
 he shuts out my prayer;  
<sup>9</sup>he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,  
 he has made my paths crooked.**

[ד] [dālet]

**<sup>10</sup>He is a bear lying in wait for me,  
 a lion in hiding;  
<sup>11</sup>he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;  
 he has made me desolate;  
<sup>12</sup>he bent his bow and set me up  
 as a target for his arrow.**

We find the same imagery used by the Psalmist:

Your arrows have sunk into me.

– Psalm 38:2

[ה] [hē]

**<sup>13</sup>He emptied into my vitals  
 the arrows of his quiver;  
<sup>14</sup>I have become the laughing-stock of all my people,  
 the object of their taunt-songs all day long.  
<sup>15</sup>He has filled me with bitterness,  
 he has sated me with wormwood.**

[ו] [wāw]

**<sup>16</sup>He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
 and trampled me down in the dust;**

To this point the author has been describing the suffering he has been experiencing, the suffering God has inflicted upon him. There is a shift in verse 17 where he speaks of how he is feeling ‘now’.

**<sup>17</sup>my soul is bereft of peace;  
 I have forgotten happiness.  
<sup>18</sup>And now I say, “Gone is my life,  
 and all that I had hoped for from YHWH.”**

[ז] [zayin]

**<sup>19</sup>Brooding on my affliction and my misery  
 is wormwood and gall!  
<sup>20</sup>My soul continually ponders it  
 and sinks within me.**

YHWH's faithful love

**<sup>21</sup>This is what I will tell my heart,  
and so recover hope:**

We have come to the turning point of the lament.

[ר] [חֵט]

**<sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of YHWH is not all past,  
his mercies are not exhausted;**

**<sup>23</sup>every morning they are renewed;  
great is your faithfulness.**

**<sup>24</sup>"YHWH is my portion," says my soul,  
"and so I will hope in him."**

The author clings to the central creed of Judaism, the classical expression of which is found in Exodus:

YHWH passed before Moses, and proclaimed,  
"YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

– Exodus 34:6

For verses 24 compare the following from the psalms:

Turn, YHWH, save my life;  
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.

– Psalm 6:4

I trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

– Psalm 13:5

YHWH is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.

– Psalm 16:5

YHWH loves justice;  
he will not forsake his faithful ones.

– Psalm 37:28

My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:26

You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Psalm 86:15

You, YHWH, are enthroned forever;  
your name endures to all generations.

– Psalm 102:12

I cry to you, YHWH;  
I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."

– Psalm 142:5

The trust expressed in this part of the lamentation is similar to that expressed by the Psalmist:

Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for in you my soul takes refuge;  
 in the shade of your wings I take refuge, until the destructive storms pass by.  
 I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfills his loving designs for me.  
 He sends from heaven to save me ...  
 God sends forth his kindness and his faithfulness.

– Psalm 57:1-3

[𐤃] [tēt]

**<sup>25</sup>YHWH is good to those who wait for him,  
 to the soul that searches for him.**

Admonition and advice (3:26-41)

**<sup>26</sup>It is good to wait in silence  
 for YHWH to save.**

**<sup>27</sup>It is good for a man to bear  
 the yoke in his youth,**

[𐤒] [yōd]

**<sup>28</sup>to sit alone in silence  
 when the Lord has imposed it,**

**<sup>29</sup>to put his mouth to the dust  
 (there may yet be hope),**

**<sup>30</sup>to offer his cheek to the smiter,  
 and be overwhelmed with insults.**

[כ] [kap]

**<sup>31</sup>For the Lord will not  
 reject forever.**

**<sup>32</sup>Although he causes grief, he will have compassion  
 so great is his steadfast love;**

**<sup>33</sup>for he takes no pleasure in afflicting  
 or causing grief to anyone.**

The Psalmist prays:

Restore us again, O God our Saviour ...  
 Will you not give us life again, so that your people may rejoice in you?  
 Show us your kindness, YHWH, and grant us your salvation.

– Psalm 85:4-7

[לָ] [lāmed]

**<sup>34</sup>When all the prisoners of the land  
 are crushed under foot,**

**<sup>35</sup>when human rights are perverted  
 in the presence of the Most High,**

**<sup>36</sup>when someone is deprived of justice  
 —does not the Lord see it?**

A lament over ‘the ruin of my people’

[מ] [mēm]

**<sup>37</sup>Who has only to say the word and things exist?  
Who commasnds if not the Lord?**

**<sup>38</sup>Is it not from the mouth of the Most High  
that good and bad come?**

**<sup>39</sup>Why then should anyone complain.  
Better to master one’s own sin.**

[נ] [nûn]

**<sup>40</sup>Let us test and examine our ways,  
and return to YHWH.**

**<sup>41</sup>Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands  
to God in heaven.**

Unit Two: From a communal psalm of lament (3:42-51)

The person responsible for compiling the Book of Lamentations has inserted here a communal lament, adapting a personal lament to the lament of the inhabitants of Jerusalem after its destruction.

**<sup>42</sup>We have transgressed and rebelled,  
and you have not forgiven.**

[ס] [sāmek]

**<sup>43</sup>You have wrapped us around with anger and pursued us,  
carried us off without pity;**

**<sup>44</sup>you have wrapped yourself with a cloud  
so that no prayer can penetrate.**

**<sup>45</sup>You have reduced us to refuse and rubbish  
among the peoples.**

[פ] [pēh]

**<sup>46</sup>All our enemies  
have opened their mouths against us;**

**<sup>47</sup>panic and pitfall have been our lot,  
devastation and destruction.**

**<sup>48</sup>My eyes dissolve in torrents of tears  
over the ruin of my people.**

[ע] [‘ayin]

**<sup>49</sup>My eyes will flow without ceasing,  
without respite,**

**<sup>50</sup>until YHWH from heaven  
looks down and sees.**

**<sup>51</sup>My eyes cause me grief  
at the fate of all the young women in my city.**

## Unit Three: Back to a personal lament (3:52-58)

[ס] [šādēh]

<sup>52</sup>Those who hate me for no reason  
 have hunted me like a bird;  
<sup>53</sup>they flung me alive into a pit  
 and hurled down stones on me;  
<sup>54</sup>the waters closed over my head;  
 I said, "I am lost."

The Psalmist prays:

Rescue me from sinking in the mire ... Do not let the flood sweep over me,  
 or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me.

– Psalm 69:14-15

[כ] [kōp]

<sup>55</sup>I called on your name, YHWH,  
 from the depths of the pit;  
<sup>56</sup>you heard my plea, "Do not close your ear  
 to my cry for help, but give me relief!"  
<sup>57</sup>You came near when I called on you;  
 you said, "Do not be afraid!"

The Psalmist rejoices:

Come close. I long for you. Redeem me. Free me from my enemies.

– Psalm 69:18

[ר] [rēš]

<sup>58</sup>You have taken up my cause, O Lord,  
 you have redeemed my life.

The psalmist pleads with God to deal with his enemies (3:59-66)

<sup>59</sup>You have seen the wrong done to me, YHWH;  
 judge my cause.  
<sup>60</sup>You have seen all their malice,  
 all their plots against me.

[ש] [šin]

<sup>61</sup>You have heard their taunts, YHWH,  
 all their plots against me.  
<sup>62</sup>The whispers and murmurs of my assailants  
 are against me all day long.  
<sup>63</sup>Whether they sit or rise—see,  
 I am the object of their taunt-songs.

Punish the enemy

[ר] [taw]

- <sup>64</sup>Pay them back for their deeds, YHWH,  
as their deeds deserve!**
- <sup>65</sup>Give them anguish of heart;  
your curse be on them!**
- <sup>66</sup>Pursue them in anger and destroy them  
from under YHWH's heavens.**