

# **FOURTH LAMENT**

## A dirge

This lamentation, like the previous ones, is acrostic. Its structure differs in that it has two lines only in each stanza (not three as in Lamentations 1-3). There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and so 44 lines (with a break in the middle of each line) in the lament. The first word in the first line of stanza 1 (and only the first line) begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of the first line of stanza 2 (and only the first line) begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on. As with acrostic psalms, the literary form emphasises the all-encompassing nature of the experience (in this case bewilderment and grief).

The Fourth Lamentation focuses on the horror of the siege and fall of the city.

### 1. A dirge lamenting those who have fallen in the disaster. Part 1 (4:1-10)

[א] [’ālep]

**<sup>1</sup>Ah, how lusterless is the gold,  
how marred the fine gold!  
The jewels lie scattered about  
at every street corner.**

It is clear from verse 2 that the poet is using the metaphor of gold to refer to the ‘children of Zion’.

[ב] [bēt]

**<sup>2</sup>The children of Zion, once so precious,  
worth their weight in fine gold,  
are reckoned as earthen pots,  
the work of a potter’s hands!**

Verse 3 speaks of famine. One of the effects of the prolonged siege.

[ג] [gîmel]

**<sup>3</sup>Even jackals offer their breast  
and suckle their young,  
but my people has become cruel,  
like the ostriches in the wilderness.**

Ostriches were thought to lay their eggs and the leave them exposed to predators.

[ד] [dālet]

**<sup>4</sup>The tongue of the infant sticks  
to the roof of its mouth for thirst;  
the children beg for food,  
but no one gives them anything.**

[ה] [hē]

**<sup>5</sup>Those who feasted on delicacies  
perish in the streets;  
those who were brought up in purple  
pick through garbage.**

[ו] [wāw]

**6For the iniquity of my people was greater  
than the transgression of Sodom,  
which was overthrown in a moment,  
though no hand was laid on it.**

[ז] [zayin]

**7Purer than snow were her nobles,  
whiter than milk;  
their bodies were more ruddy than coral,  
their beards like lapis lazuli.**

[ח] [ḥēt]

**8Now their visage is blacker than soot;  
they are not recognized in the streets.  
Their skin has shrivelled on their bones;  
it has become as dry as wood.**

[ט] [tēt]

**9Happier were those slain by the sword  
than those who fell victim to hunger,  
whose life drains away, deprived  
of the produce of the field.**

[י] [yōd]

**10The hands of compassionate women  
have boiled their own children;  
they became their food  
in the destruction of my people.**

2. YHWH's anger at the sins of the prophets and priests (4:11-13).

Following the tradition of the prophets, the author is looking at events at two levels. In verses 11-12 he speaks of the ultimate level: it is God who brought about the disaster. In verse 13 he blames the priests and the prophets. It was their behaviour that caused God to have to act.

[כ] [kap]

**11YHWH gave full vent to his wrath;  
he poured out his anger,  
and kindled a fire in Zion  
that consumed its foundations.**

[לָ] [lāmed]

**<sup>12</sup>The kings of the earth could not believe it,  
nor could any of the inhabitants of the world,  
that foe or enemy would pass through  
the gates of Jerusalem.**

Psalm 48 speaks of the amazement experienced by foreign kings at God's protection of his city:

Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense.  
Then the kings assembled, they came on together.  
As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;  
they were in panic, they took to flight;  
trembling took hold of them there, pains as of a woman in labour.

– Psalm 48:3-6

[מֵ] [mēm]

**<sup>13</sup>It was for the sins of her prophets  
and the iniquities of her priests,  
who shed the blood of the righteous  
in her midst.**

3. A dirge lamenting those who have fallen in the disaster. Part 2 (4:14-16)

[נִ] [nûn]

**<sup>14</sup>Blindly they wandered through the streets,  
so defiled with blood;  
they are spent and exhausted;  
their clothing is in tatters.**

[סָ] [sāmek]

**<sup>15</sup>“Away! Unclean!” people shouted at them;  
“Away! Away! Do not touch!”  
So they became fugitives and wanderers;  
it was said, “They can stay here no longer.”**

[פֵּ] [pēh]

**<sup>16</sup>YHWH himself has destroyed them,  
he regards them no more;  
no honour was shown to the priests,  
no favour to the elders.**

## 4. An insertion: lamenting the capture of the king (4:17-20)

[א] [‘ayin]

**17Our eyes failed, ever watching  
vainly for help;  
we were watching eagerly  
for a nation that did not come to our help.**

The reference is to Egypt. We know from Jeremiah that the siege was lifted when the Babylonians withdrew to confront Egypt (see Jeremiah 34:21-22; 37:5-11; see also 2Kings 25:4-7). Having repulsed Egypt, they renewed the siege. The prophet Jeremiah spoke out against looking to Egypt. He is not the author of this lament.

[צ] [šādēh]

**18They dogged our steps  
so that we could not walk in our streets;  
our end drew near; our days were numbered;  
for our end had come.**

[פ] [kōp]

**19Our pursuers were swifter  
than the eagles in the heavens;  
they chased us on the mountains,  
they lay in wait for us in the wilderness.**

[ר] [rēš]

**20YHWH’s anointed, the breath of our life,  
was taken in their pits –  
the one of whom we said, “In his shade  
we will live among the nations.”**

## 5. Calling for the punishment of Edom (4:21-22)

Compare Lamentations 1:22 and 3:64-66. This theme occurs also in the psalms of lament (see, for example, Psalm 145:20).

[ש] [šin]

**21Rejoice and be glad, O daughter Edom,  
you that live in the land of Uz;  
but to you also the cup will pass;  
you will become drunk and expose yourself.**

[ת] [taw]

**22Your punishment is complete, O daughter Zion,  
he will not exile you again;  
but your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish,  
he will expose your sins.**

Edom took advantage of Zion’s collapse (see Obadiah).

