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LAMENTATIONS

INTRODUCTION

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These lamentations were composed in the wake of the siege and capture of Jerusalem in 587BC. The Second Book of Kings reports this catastrophe:

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of YHWH, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had defected to the king of Babylon—all the rest of the population. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vine dressers and tillers of the soil.

Unlike the above report, the texts we are about to read in the Book of Lamentations do not speak about what happened; they are cries from the heart directed to God by people who have been through the experience. A little over twenty years earlier, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were experiencing a degree of hope that they had not known for years. Assyria was weak, and King Josiah was on the throne. He was determined to reunite Judah and the northern kingdom, and to re-establish the ancient kingdom of David. Then in 609 he was killed at Megiddo when he attempted to intercept the Egyptian army. It was not difficult for them to accept the death of a sinful monarch, but that God (in their understanding) would arrange for the innocent and faithful Josiah to be slain baffled and bewildered them. What was YHWH doing? What did YHWH's faithfulness mean when this could happen?

Things deteriorated rapidly under his son, Jehoiakim, who was put on the throne by Egypt. In 605 the Babylonian army defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish (in the north of modern Syria near the border of Turkey). That same year Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylon and he set about expanding the new Babylonian Empire.

In 598 Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege. He was succeeded briefly by his eighteen year old son, Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name Jehoiachin. He reigned for the first three months of 597BC. He decided to surrender, and the siege was lifted. He was taken into exile in Babylon, along with all the leading citizens. Nebuchadnezzar replaced him with another of Josiah's sons, Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, who was given the throne name Zedekiah.

Zedekiah sought alliance with Egypt in a vain effort to avoid the clutches of Babylon. Self-acclaimed 'prophets' kept reassuring the people that it was impossible for Jerusalem to fall, since its security was guaranteed by YHWH. The prophet Jeremiah kept insisting that their security depended on their fidelity. No one wanted to listen to him. He spoke out in YHWH's name against the folly of looking to Egypt. When Zedekiah finally allied himself with Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar decided to lay siege to Jerusalem. This time he was determined to raze the city to the ground. He succeeded in 587BC. Zedekiah was taken into exile along with another wave of exiles (2Kings 25:7).

In the Book of Lamentations we hear the suffering and the bewilderment of those left behind in Judah.

Isaiah 40:27 and 49:14 express laments. Zechariah 7:3-5, composed in 518, witnesses to the practice of fasting and mourning in the fifth month ‘during these seventy years’ (588-518). These lamentations were part of the mourning ritual. The text from 2Kings dates the fall of Jerusalem to ‘the seventh day of the month’. Jeremiah 52:12 gives the date as the tenth. In Jewish tradition the Lamentations are read on the *ninth* day of the fifth month (July-August in the modern calendar), because of the tradition that the second temple fell to Titus on the ninth. Both catastrophes are being commemorated.

The first, second and fourth song are the central core of this Book. They are communal laments (compare Isaiah 23:1-14 and a number of the Psalms) that give expression to the bewilderment of those who have gone through the horrors of the siege and the destruction, and who have seen their families starving and slaughtered, their king and leaders deported, and God’s sanctuary defiled. They are aware of their sin, but this awareness does not add up to what has happened, which is out of proportion to their guilt. In keeping with their theology of God as controlling events (we will return to this shortly), they see God as the ultimate cause of the horrors they have been through. But this is equally bewildering. How could the just God, the God who remains faithful to the covenant even when we sin, how could this God have willed such a dreadful holocaust?

The inspiring thing about these communal laments is that the people have somehow retained their faith. They have not discarded their God. They have not rejected their belief. These laments are addressed to God. The community is pouring out its heart to God, pleading for God to take notice, and to intervene. For reasons that are beyond their comprehension, God has willed the horrors. Only God can intervene to bring relief.

There is a time and place for acceptance. But there is a time and place to cry out to God in pain and bewilderment. This is the gift of the Book of Lamentations. A Christian cannot help but think of Jesus’ lament over the coming destruction of Jerusalem (see Luke 19:41), as well as his cry from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why, but why have you abandoned me?’ (Mark 15:34). This cry arises from a visceral experience of being abandoned. It arises because the situation makes no sense. But, like the laments of this book, it is still a cry of profound faith. Jesus is crying out to one whom he calls ‘My God, *my* God!’

The fifth song is like the others, but appears to be a later addition. The third song is very different. It is a personal lament, composed by a later author who is distant from the experience of the siege and destruction of the city. We will examine these difference when we come to comment on the text.

In the Hebrew Bible the title of the Book of Lamentations comes from the initial word **הֵכָה** [’ēkā; ‘how’]. In the Greek Septuagint it is entitled ‘Threnoi’[‘lamentations’]. The Septuagint attributes the work to Jeremiah. This idea found encouragement in the words of Jeremiah: ‘For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me’(8:21), and in the claim in 2Chronicles: ‘Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a custom in Israel; they are recorded in the Laments’(35:25).

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Though some of the content of the Book of Lamentations fits well with Jeremiah's theology and outlook, some does not. As the text stands in the Hebrew Bible, it is, of course, a written document. It is important to recognise that the cries that we read were at first spontaneous expression of pain and bewilderment. There is no reason to exclude Jeremiah from being one of those whose cries we can hear in some parts of the laments, but he is not the author of the Book.

Because the catastrophe is experienced as a 'death' (of the city, the monarchy, and the temple, as well as many of the inhabitants), in the laments we will find echoes of the funeral dirge (Hebrew: *qināh*; see especially 1:1-6).

Whoever is responsible for writing down the first, second and fourth laments has picked up the heartfelt cries. The writing down ensures that the experience is not lost for future generations. The writer has also imposed a form on the text – something that is especially obvious from the way he has organised the material of all five laments to fit the Hebrew alphabet. As Claus Westermann states in his *Lamentations: issues and interpretation* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994, page 100): 'The acrostic form was imposed on the text at a later stage'. The first and second laments consist of 22 stanzas of 3 lines. The first word in line one of the first stanza begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word in line one of the second stanza begins with the second letter, and so on through the 22 stanzas, one for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Similarly for the third Lamentation, though here the appropriate letter is found at the beginning of each of the three lines (not only the first) in the stanza. The fourth Lamentation has two (not three) lines in each stanza. Like Lamentations 1 and 2 only the first line of each stanza has the appropriate letter. The fifth Lamentation is not acrostic, but, like Psalms 33, 38 and 103, it keeps a link with the alphabet in having 22 stanzas. One effect of having 22 stanzas is to underline the all-encompassing (from A to Z) nature of the suffering, bewilderment and grief. Clearly we are dealing with a literary work. There is nothing of the spontaneous in this pattern.

God as the cause of the destruction

It is important to reflect on a basic and unquestioned assumption that underlies the texts we are examining. Those who went through the experience assumed that it was God who determined the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. This is consistent with an idea that is prevalent throughout the Older Testament, namely, that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment. This way of thinking permeates the texts we are studying.

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control.

The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he didn't punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control.

The texts we are about to study are clear in presenting the compassion and fidelity of God. They are also aware of the responsibility of human beings for bringing about the suffering that we experience. However, they still portray God as the one who organised the disaster of 587, in order to purify the people. They were convinced that God chose the Babylonian army as his instrument in this.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: 'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, by *loving*. When creation is open to God's action, beautiful, 'miraculous' things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is essentially free and not determined. We experience this. When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love.

We do not see God favouring the Babylonians over Judah just because the Babylonian army was victorious. So we do not assume that Jerusalem was destroyed because of human sin. However, it is clear that the people whose cries we hear in the Book of Lamentations thought this way. Jesus' contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong.

We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We don't – or at least we shouldn't – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. Jesus was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will. What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The understanding present in the texts we are about to read is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others do the same. If we were to do this, think of the 'miracles' that would happen in this world: miracles that only God's love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful.

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We can pray like a child for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: ‘Not my will but yours be done’(Mark 14:36).

The habit of looking at reality simultaneously on two levels enabled Older Testament writers to see any disagreeable situation as being the self-inflicted results of bad human decisions, and as being at the same time evidence of divine punishment for sin. So they readily understood suffering as being a punishment by God, and repentance as a means of avoiding catastrophe. They thought of YHWH as the cause of hurt and deception when these occur, and as the ultimate cause of everything that happens.

If we understand this as eliminating or bypassing human causality we are failing to grasp the subtlety of Older Testament theology. God is not another and a dominant actor in human history. God is the transcendent one. The gift of the prophet was to see beyond the human arena to the transcendent will of YHWH, to point to the evidence of God’s action in history, to stir people to listen to God’s word and to heed it, in order that they might be effective instruments of God in the world and carry out faithfully the mission given to them. Their aim in speaking as they did was to direct people’s attention in the actual circumstances of their life to the presence and action of God offering them life and calling them to respond in faith.

What is special about the Book of Lamentations is that it is not a reflection on events by an inspired prophet. It is not a teaching text, listing the lessons that need to be learned. It is (for the most part) a cry of the heart addressed to God by people who are bewildered by the horror of their experience, who can make no sense of it. The only one to whom they can turn is God, and their intuition is right. They are allowed to give expression to their anger, their bewilderment, their pain. While their understanding of God’s role in the catastrophe should be questioned, they continue to look to God, knowing that God will hear their cry and respond as only God knows best. Surely there is a precious lesson in this for us?