

Lamentations

Introduction

Lamentations was written probably soon after the destruction of Jerusalem (586) in "reaction to the physical devastation of the city and expresses the psychological and spiritual anguish over God's abandonment of his people and his hostility toward them" (IOT 305).

Jerusalem (representing the people) is a lonely widow, a princess become a slave, 1.1.

Judah is in exile, 1.3

It despairs at the thought that God is Judah's enemy (cf. the enemy in 1:10, 16 fulfills the word of the Lord, 2:17; the Lord is like an enemy, 2:1, 4-5; 1:5, 12, 14; 2:22).

1A. Literary Analysis

1B. Genre

The genre of this anonymous work is poetic communal lament. Here the corporate is individualized, "the individual gives utterance to the suffering and pain of the whole community (IOT 306).

2B. Use of Personification

A poetic device that occurs is persona or personification in which the book describes the nation's experience in terms of a specific person. In Lamentations, OT scholar Lanahan cites five personifications in the five chapters (IOT 310): woman, reporter, male sufferer, bourgeois, and choral voices.

The image of "daughter of Zion" runs through the book (1:6, 15, so "I" in 14, 16, refers to "her"; 2:1, 10, 13, 18; 4:22 with "her" from 4:6ff). Chapter 3 has the image of an afflicted man.

The afflicted woman (1:3) and the afflicted man (3:1) represent the women and men of Judah, overrun, killed with the sword, carried off captive to Babylon, and left groping through the streets like they were blind (4:14).

Chapter 5 is first person plural voice of prayer to God by the afflicted people (see us, our, elders, mothers, fathers, young men).

What does Zion represent? Zion's daughter and son are afflicted. Zion is the city of God where the temple was built; she is the specially blessed people of God. What has come forth from the specially blessed people of God? She has an afflicted son and daughter.

Israel is represented as an afflicted widow with afflicted children. As a widow she stretches out her hands but is not comforted (1:17); her children have gone into exile because of her many sins (1:5). She is like a daughter whose princes have fled in weakness while she was destroyed for her uncleanness (1:8). Judah is like a son under the rod (3:1), a target for arrows (3:12, from God's bow). However, he cannot complain since he is punished for his own sins (3:39). He too is unclean (4:15).

So judgment has come upon priests (4:16), elders (4:16), and king (4:20, no doubt Zedekiah).

3B. Outline

First lament 1:1-3:20

Hope 3:21-66

Second lament 4

Final Prayer 5

The final chapter is a prayer in two parts. First, the petition is grounded in Zion's disgrace pleading what has happened as a basis for God's compassion. Second, the petition is grounded in the sovereignty of God who rules from generation to generation and who is able to restore Judah to himself that they may return if he so chooses (5:19-22).

Note the argument with a missing part expressed in the prayer:

If you have not utterly rejected us

Missing part: and you have not (cf. 3:21-23)

Then restore us to yourself

God must mend the breach between us and Him, between sinners and Himself.

4B. Theme

The theme of the book is sorrow over the consequences of sin with hope for undeserved mercy rooted in God's great covenant faithfulness that is new every morning (3:23).

2A. Cause of captivity in relation to the covenant

This captivity has not come upon Judah in spite of God's covenant. It is not that God failed to keep his word. It has come because of it (covenant curses), due to Zion's sin.

3A. Request for mercy

What they request is mercy in spite of disobedience and its devastating consequences, mercy that rests solely with God to grant. Moreover, here is the place for hope for God has set it before himself to save Israel. Even in her disobedience, she is not consumed for his compassions never fail (3:22-26).

This is like Job resting in the sovereignty of God as bottom line (42:2) and Isaiah acknowledging that unless God has left us a seed we would be like Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 1:9). The writer is committed to sovereign mercy.

4A. Message for us

1) In judgment, God continues to show mercy.

Jesus laments over Jerusalem whose house will be left desolate (Lk. 13:34-35; 19:41-44).

Nevertheless, he has come in the name of the Lord; the temple (city and people) will be cleansed. For in judgment on Israel, God continues to accomplish his purposes for the fallen human family through the seed of Eve and Abraham. When Israel is afflicted in her uncleanness (Lam. 1:8; 3:39) she is not consumed because of God's unfailing love and new mercies every morning (Lam. 3:22, 31).

From afflicted Israel comes a new nation, one that includes Jews first and Greeks (Matt. 21; Rom. 11:1, though Israel is judged, she is not rejected, "I," says Paul, "am an Israelite").

2) Joy will come in the morning

The night of God's judgment is hard and painful but God's mercies are new every day and joy truly comes in the morning. His throne endures from generation to generation and his compassions never fail (Lam. 5:19; 3:22).

Therefore, we can have hope and say the words of Lamentations 3:24-26. Thus, in spite of the enormous rupture caused by Israel's sin, the avenue of God's renewed mercy, even if withdrawn momentarily, was still open to the faithful as it had been in the past (Childs IOTS 596).

Corporately we may lament decline of churches and the national embarrassment of leaders but for His unfailing love and covenant faithfulness, we would all be consumed.

Individually we may suffer for wrongdoing and be chastened as sons and daughters but we will not be consumed; our very repentance and faith is His gift that He authors and finishes (Heb. 12:1-2). He knows the way of the righteous that cling to Christ as their great high priest.