

Lamentations  
April 25, 2021  
*Lamentations* Chapter 5

Our lesson author has again chosen a scripture for this study of prophets that is not from “The Prophets,” the second division of the Hebrew scripture. “*The Law*” is the first division, the books *Genesis* through *Deuteronomy*. Jesus refers to scripture as “The Law and the Prophets.” It was only at the end of the first century A.D. that the Jews officially recognized the third unit as scripture, “The Writings.” The books of *Chronicles*, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, and as well *Lamentations* and others, were given canonical status at that time, while other writings such as *Maccabees* were left out. *Lamentations* was placed after *Ruth* and before *Esther*. Meanwhile, more than a century earlier, a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, called “*The Septuagint*” (abbreviated as LXX), had come into circulation. It included all of the Writings too, including those that were not eventually accepted as scripture. In *The Septuagint*, *Lamentations* was ascribed to Jeremiah, and placed immediately after his book. *The Septuagint* was the basis for the Christian *Old Testament*, and so the Christian *Bible* also places *Lamentations* in that same place, usually ascribed to Jeremiah.

*Lamentations* includes five poems, one in each chapter. Chapters 2 and 4 seem to have been written immediately after the catastrophe of the fall and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587-586 B.C. Those two chapters may be by the same author. Chapter 3 is a personal lament not referenced to these events. The viewpoint portrayed by the author may be Jeremiah’s. Chapters 1 and 5 seem to be removed from the immediate catastrophe by some years, decades maybe. The author, or authors, of these poems has some significant differences in perspective compared to Jeremiah. The author(s) of *Lamentations* seem to regard kings, princes, and priests more highly than Jeremiah does, King Zedekiah especially. The author expected help from the Egyptians (4:17). Jeremiah does not. The *Book of Jeremiah* preserves many laments from that prophet himself, which were included in his book and so made part of “The Prophets.” The fact that *Lamentations* was separate, and not included, is an additional indication of a different author. The ascription to Jeremiah was added later in the Greek version.

I’d like to backtrack a bit and give the history of the fall of Jerusalem. It wasn’t simple. Jerusalem was first besieged by the Babylonians in the time of King Jehoiakim, a son of King Josiah, and a client king of Pharaoh Neco of Egypt.

Jehoiakim switched his allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, but then he revolted. The Egyptians didn't come to help, even though they probably encouraged the revolt against Babylon. During the siege, Jehoiakim died. His 18 year old son, King Jehoiachin surrendered to the Babylonians three months later. That was 597 B.C. King Jehoiachin and most of his court as well as useful artisans, and the royal and temple treasures, were carried off to Babylon. These were the first of the Exiles, including Daniel and Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar set up another son of Josiah, Zedekiah, age 21, as a client king. Then King Zedekiah, too, rebelled several years later. Nebuchadnezzar returned with his army and laid siege to Jerusalem again. It was during this time that Jeremiah, inside Jerusalem, was prophesying against King Zedekiah, and counseling surrender to the Babylonians.

The siege turned into famine for those inside the city. Eventually the Babylonian army breached the walls. Zedekiah and his army fled the city through the King's Garden toward Jericho, but the Babylonians pursued, captured King Zedekiah, and scattered the remnants of his army. The Babylonians killed Zedekiah, his family, priests, and officials. They carried off into captivity most of those who remained. A "governor" named Gedeliah was appointed over the province, ruling from Mizpah. Many of the people of Judah who had fled to Moab, Edom, Egypt, or other places began to return. Jeremiah was offered the opportunity to stay, which he did. He encouraged those remaining to continue living their lives. There were still in the land some Judahite soldiers and leaders who had evaded the Babylonians at Jerusalem. So there remained potential for continuing conflict between them and the Babylonians and those cooperating with them.

Ammon was a nearby country to the east, a place like Moab and Edom, that was often in conflict with the Israelites. The king of Ammon (according to Jeremiah 40:13-14), sent an assassin named Ishmael ("of the royal family," according to 2 Kings 25:25) to kill Gedeliah. He did so, and killed a lot of others besides, including Babylonian (Chaldean) soldiers left as a garrison. The leaders and army remnants of Judah then attacked this Ishmael, but he escaped. They did rescue many whom Ishmael was carrying away captive. So, the question was, what to do next? The Babylonians would be angry and see this, the killing of their governor and troops, as a rebellion. The leaders were afraid Nebuchadnezzar would return more angry than ever. The question was put to Jeremiah, to stay, or to flee to Egypt?

Jeremiah prayed for ten days, and received an answer. Stay and depend on the Lord, who promises mercy, he told them. (Jeremiah 42:7-22). That wasn't the answer the leaders, those who had escaped the Babylonians, wanted. They took everyone off to Egypt anyway, including Jeremiah. Once in Egypt, they were determined to continue in idolatry, with offerings to the queen of heaven and perhaps other gods, practices ended by King Josiah's reform. They completely misunderstand what has happened.

**<sup>15</sup> Then all the men who were aware that their wives had been making offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: <sup>16</sup> "As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we are not going to listen to you. <sup>17</sup> Instead, we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. We used to have plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no misfortune. <sup>18</sup> But from the time we stopped making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have perished by the sword and by famine." <sup>19</sup> And the women said,<sup>[a]</sup> "Indeed we will go on making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her; do you think that we made cakes for her, marked with her image, and poured out libations to her without our husbands' being involved?"** (Jeremiah 44: 15-19).

So, when the Exiles eventually did return and rebuild Jerusalem, it was from Babylon, not Egypt. The words of Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and Isaiah of the Exile, were received by the remnants of Judah there. It would seem that Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch, must have carried his writings, even these last chapters from Egypt, to the exile community in Babylon. Thus Judaism and the Jews as a people came to be.

I mention this complicated history because the destruction of Jerusalem was not just one singular event. Even after the destruction, there were armed men roaming the countryside continuing rebellion. There were attacks and plundering by the other Babylonian client states in the area, particularly Ammon, Moab and Edom. As we read in Ezra and Nehemiah, it is no surprise that when the Exiles did return, these neighboring peoples are the primary opposition. This is much like what we see in our world. We too see insurgencies and terrorism and interference

by neighboring states in the affairs of their neighbors. Jeremiah counseled acceptance by the survivors of Judah that the Babylonians were the dominant empire at the time. He urged cooperation and rebuilding of lives, rather than defiance, even though that Jerusalem and their Kingdom of Judah had been destroyed.

So, returning to *Lamentations*, the context is that there had been lots of opportunities to return to God and accept judgment, and perhaps even evade the worst of all that had happened. Yes, the siege and the destruction was terrible. If you want details you can find them in *Lamentations* and in *Jeremiah*. Those who were used to luxuries were now enslaved, and led off to Babylon. Things were made worse by continued rebellion, not only against Babylon, but against God. Even in Egypt, the refugees would not listen to Jeremiah, but convinced themselves that all they had been doing before the catastrophe had been acceptable. They could blame it all on the sins of their ancestors.

We can be thankful for those exiles who found that, even in Babylon, the Lord was there and still cared for them. Ezekiel and other prophets continued their mission, now no longer prophesying doom, but prophesying hope. One of the key issues was that of responsibility. Jeremiah's wonderful prophesy of hope, 31:31-34 is immediately preceded by 31: 29-30: **“In those days they shall no longer say: ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.”** Ezekiel discusses this more fully in *Ezekiel* 18. God will judge individuals on their own sins or righteousness. Sins of ancestors can't be used as the target of blame. Jeremiah looks forward to the days when God's Law will be written on the hearts of his faithful.

Notice that *Lamentations* 5:7 places responsibility for the catastrophe on ancestors. But, verse 16 acknowledges, **“... for we have sinned.”** Does that “we” include the present generation? As we have seen of those who went to Egypt, their answer was to continue what they had done before. In Babylon, and in the post-exile Jerusalem, the Jews took a different path, rejecting idolatry, and seeking to purify themselves and find their way back to God. That ultimately set the stage for the appearance of the Messiah about 400 years later. Not that everything went smoothly over those years. They, and we, are human after all.

As I reflect on those times and ours, their catastrophe and those that threaten us today, I am reminded that God's ways are not our ways. The inhabitants of Jerusalem could not imagine that God would let Jerusalem fall and His temple be destroyed. There was such an investment there! God needed that temple and His chosen people. We seem to still think the same way today about our property, investments, and institutions. What would God do without us? We need to preserve this or that building, or organization, or way of doing things. But unless we do these things in righteousness, with God's purpose foremost, we can find ourselves going in the wrong direction. God didn't need that temple in Jerusalem. What He needed was a people willing to live with His spirit within them. In Jesus Christ, God came to earth and showed us how to live.

Jesus didn't build a temple. Indeed, the Jewish temple, so gloriously rebuilt yet again by Herod, fell to the Romans and was demolished in 70 A.D., only about a century later. Jesus's kingdom was not of this world. It lives on in the Church. Not the building

, not the denominational organizations, but in the hearts of the followers of Jesus, wherever they may be found. Let us give thanks for the wonderful gift of this New Covenant that we have to live by, as we continue to celebrate Easter.

*Prayer: Healing God, may the laments of this lesson enable us to turn to you for the griefs we need to heal. Amen.*