

SESSION FOURTEEN

JEREMIAH / LAMENTATIONS

Synthesis of Ch 21—52 and Insights on Lamentations

REVIEW

The book of Jeremiah focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC. This includes Jeremiah's prophetic ministry leading up to and following this great tragedy of the Old Testament. In the previous section, we pointed out that the book has three major sections. The first section (ch 1–20) sets forth Yahweh's contention with His covenant people of Judah. The second section (ch 21–39) describes the judgment that Yahweh is bringing upon Judah and Jerusalem (along with a salvation message for the nation's future). The final section (ch 40–51) looks at the aftermath of destruction, including prophecies of anticipated judgment on Gentile nations. Ch 52 is an historical supplement to the book.

SECTION II — YAHWEH'S JUDGMENT UPON JUDAH AND JERUSALEM

(Ch 21—39)

A. Jeremiah's Conflicts with Authority (Ch 21–29)

1. Utterances of Judgment on the Nation's Leadership (Ch 21–25)

Chapters 21–23 are a series of messages that Jeremiah delivered during the reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Thus the date implied in ch 21 (588) should not be taken as a reference to all three chapters. As the prophet reports his material, he chooses to begin at the historical point of 588 BC, and he ends (ch 37–39) with the destruction of 586 BC. But in between, he does not write in chronological order.

Chapter 21 probably opens in the year 588 BC at the time when the Babylonians were advancing against Jerusalem, but not yet at close range (vv 4,13).¹ King Zedekiah (r. 597-586) finds himself in quite a dilemma as the Babylonians close in. Surrender seems the only option, and so he sends representatives (at least one from the priesthood) to

¹ Egypt inspired revolution, and Zedekiah was under terrific pressure to break with Babylon. Anderson explains:

"The new nobility was pro-Egyptian, and saw in Necho, or in his successor Psammetichus II, who came to the throne four years after Nebuchadnezzar's invasion (594 B.C.E.), the political potential that might restore a balance of power to the Fertile Crescent and allow Judah and other small nations to regain independence. . . . So it is not surprising that in the fourth year of Zedekiah's reign—the year of the accession of Psammetichus II—Egyptian agents encouraged the formation of an anti-Babylonian coalition consisting of Edom, Moab, Ammon, and Phoenicia. Envoys were sent to Zedekiah to persuade him to throw in his lot with the revolutionary movement (Jer. 27:3)" (Bernard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed. [New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986], 414).

Jeremiah to inquire of the LORD for God's favor against the Babylonians. Not only does Jeremiah not secure God's favor for them, but he even prophesies that the LORD is going to aid the Babylonians in punishing Jerusalem (21:1-7).

Chapter 22 portrays the rejection of the unrighteous Davidic kings who followed Josiah. Only if there is true repentance (evidenced by justice and compassion) will the Davidic kings be spared from the Babylonians and granted God's favor. Notice that the explanation in 22:8-9 fulfills Deuteronomy 29:24-26. Each of the kings of this period (excepting Zedekiah) is addressed in chapter 22. Ch 22:10a looks at Josiah, 22:10b-12 at Jehoahaz (=Shallum), 22:13-23 at Jehoiakim, and 22:24-30 at Jehoiachin. Ch 22:30 predicts that the sons of Jehoiachin would be cursed—they would not sit on the throne of David as kings. [The statement in 22:30, "Write this man down childless," does not mean that Jehoiachin would have no children but that they would not reign on David's throne].

Ch 23:1-8 is a denunciation of the unrighteous kings of Judah who had been the subject of the preceding chapter (they are unworthy shepherds!). In contrast to them, God is promising to raise up a righteous shepherd (vv 5-8)—a prediction to be fulfilled with the Lord Jesus Christ. The promise that in His days "Judah will be saved" and "dwell securely" is a clue to the meaning of Romans 11:26—"and thus all Israel will be saved." The remainder of chapter 23 (vv 9-40) is a strong denunciation of the false prophets. Notice carefully 23:21-22 and vv 25-32! Just because someone *claims* that the Lord has spoken through them does not mean this is valid.

Chapter 25 backs up to the 4th year of Jehoiakim (605 BC) near the time of the battle of Carchemish, when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ended the domination of Palestine by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. Jeremiah records that the people of Judah have not listened to him throughout his 23 years of ministry. Consequently, Jeremiah predicted that Nebuchadnezzar would be Yahweh's rod of discipline (he is called 'My servant' in 25:9), and God's people would have to serve the king of Babylon for 70 years (25:11; 29:10).² At the end of that 70 years, however, Babylon itself would be punished (25:12). Apparently a period of 70 years is chosen because the people had violated the law of "sabbath rest" for the land (Lev 25:3-5; 2 Chr 36:20-21). The period of violation would be 442-490 years (depending on whether or not the year of Jubilee is also included—Lev 25:8-12). This would have included the entire period of the monarchy.

2. Conflicts of the Prophet Recorded (Ch 26–29)

These chapters focus upon the arrest of Jeremiah and his conflicts with the false prophets. His message urging surrender to Babylon brought personal suffering to his life.

Chapter 27:1 is dated at the beginning of Zedekiah's reign, and chapters 27–29 are closely linked. Feinberg writes,

²For the view that the 70-year reference is not to be understood literally, see Chisholm, "A Theology of Jeremiah and Lamentations," *A Theology of the Old Testament* (349-50). One problem with this view, however, is that Chisholm assumes a very strict chronological order of 2 Chronicles 36. This is not necessarily so. 2 Chr 36:17-19 may be looking at a broader view of Babylon's assault on Jerusalem (not just with 586 BC in mind), such that the chapter consists of only a *general* chronological arrangement. Note the reference in v 18 to the removal of the treasures from the Temple, a situation very possibly corresponding to Dan 1:1-3 in 605 BC, as well as to Jehoiachin's exile in 597 BC (2 Kgs 24:10-14).

Chapters 27–28 attack the false optimism of the prophets of Judah and are dated by the majority of scholars in the fourth year of Zedekiah (594-593 BC). Foreign envoys were coming to Jerusalem to promote a confederacy against Nebuchadnezzar. Neighboring countries were apparently trying to involve Judah in a rebellion against Babylon, an enterprise encouraged by the false prophets at Jerusalem. . . . Chapters 27–29 were written to dispel the erroneous view that Babylon was just a passing power, not to be reckoned with.³

Ch 29 is a letter to the exiles of 605 and 597. Instructions are given for blessing in the period of exile (grace!). Chisholm writes, "Resigning himself to the inevitability of judgment, the prophet looked to the exiles as the future hope of the nation (24:1-10) and encouraged them to settle down in Babylon, contribute to the prosperity of their new land, and await their ultimate release (29:1-14)."⁴ The present exile will last 70 years (vv 10-14), but God has a future plan for Israel which is contingent upon the nation calling upon the Lord.

"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (29:13).

The verses which follow use the terminology of Deut 30:1-10, looking forward to the time when Israel will be restored and brought into the bond of the New Covenant.

B. Messages of Consolation Concerning the Future of Judah (Ch 30–33)

In the midst of pronouncing and carrying out judgment upon Judah, the action is suspended momentarily to portray the future hope for the nation when God will bless them and fulfill His promises to them. This is an appropriate point to insert this material for two reasons: (1) the prophet had just ended ch 29 on the note that God had plans for the nation to give them a future and a hope (29:11); and (2) the following chapters (34–39) include the actual fall of Jerusalem (this was gracious of God to give a message of consolation just before her greatest tragedy came upon her). It will be in this section (ch 30–33) that the announcement of the New Covenant will be given (a topic to be covered in the next session). Significantly, the fulfillment of the New Covenant with Israel will be preceded by a terrible time of distress (note 30:1-11). From our perspective, this will be fulfilled in the Great Tribulation (one primary purpose of the Great Tribulation is to discipline the nation of Israel and bring them to repentance before God).

Jer 33:14-18 clarifies that the fulfillment of the New Covenant with Israel will coincide with God's fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant with Israel.⁵

C. The Culmination of Judgment (Ch 34–39)

The judgment theme that has been so pervasive throughout the book reaches its climax in these chapters, as the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple is fulfilled. This section is composed of two main parts: chapters 34–36 supply some crucial information just preceding the fall of Jerusalem, and chapters 37–39 portray the judgment during the fall.

³Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 543.

⁴Chisholm, 348.

⁵Though this event may be the *culmination* of the Davidic Covenant promise, this would not rule out a partial fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant promise at the time of Christ's resurrection/ascension (cf. Acts 13:32-33).

1. Before the Fall (Ch 34–36)

As chapter 34 opens, the fighting with Nebuchadnezzar is depicted as being under way (historically, the siege actually began in 588 BC and lasted about 30 months).⁶ Ch 35, on the other hand, backs us up to the days of Jehoiakim (r. 609-597). The flashback is used to highlight the obedience of the Rechabites. Feinberg concludes, "Chapter 35 has a single objective: to contrast the obedience of the Rechabites with the disobedience of Judah. The episode is a rebuke to the nation for their unfaithfulness to God."⁷

2. During the Fall (Ch 37–39)

Ch 39:1-10 records the actual victory of the Babylonians over Jerusalem and the end of the siege. Notice the kindness shown to Jeremiah in 39:11ff.

SECTION III — THE AFTERMATH OF DESTRUCTION (Ch 40–51)

This last major section records Jeremiah's ministry after the destruction (ch 40–45) and various prophecies concerning God's judgment of Gentile nations (46–51). Recall Jeremiah's multi-national calling in 1:10. This culminates in the prophecies against Babylon in ch 50–51, since wicked Babylon had been God's agent against Judah. She abused her role by her arrogant opposition to God (50:11,14,24,29-32), her excessive mistreatment of God's people (50:11,17-18,33; 51:24,34-35,49), and her lack of respect for His Temple (51:11). Ch 52 is almost identical to 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30 and shows how Jeremiah's prophecies were fulfilled in contrast to those of the false prophets. The dates and figures listed in 52:28-30, however, do not correspond with those of 2 Kgs 24. Thus, the deportations listed in vv 28-30 may be some minor ones distinct from those listed in 2 Kgs 24 (note the deportation of 10,000 in the 8th year—2 Kgs 24:10-14).

LAMENTATIONS

A. Acrostic Poetic Style

Lamentations consists of five chapters, each representing a poem in itself. Chapters 1 and 2 have three lines in each of their 22 verses. The first line of each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.⁸ Chapter 3 also has 66 lines, but a stronger acrostic pattern with 22 clusters of three lines each. All three lines of the first cluster begin with the Hebrew א, the next three with ב, and so forth. Chapter 4 has two lines per verse, but only the first line carries the acrostic pattern. Chapter 5 is distinct, having 22 lines (the number of the Hebrew alphabet) but the lines do not begin with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

B. Historical Setting

The book reflects the tragic destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The historical tradition is that Jeremiah wrote it. The similarity of the personal suffering depicted in chapter 3 reflects what

⁶Dyer dates the siege from Jan 15, 588 to Jul 18, 586 BC ("Jeremiah," *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Old Testament, 1185).

⁷Feinberg, 599.

⁸Several places have a reversal of the letters ו and ז (see 2:16-17; 3:46-51; and 4:16-17).

we know of Jeremiah. Furthermore, Jeremiah wrote a lament about Josiah (2 Chr 35:25) which supports this traditional view of the authorship of the book.

C. The Split Alphabet Pattern

In the first chapter, the first 11 verses (the first half of the Hebrew alphabet, i.e., א to כ) discuss the pitiable state of Jerusalem, personified throughout. In the second 11 verses (the second half of the Hebrew alphabet, i.e., ל to ט), the motif shifts to personified Jerusalem talking about herself. Hence the center of the first poem (ch 1) is at verses 11-12. A slightly different emphasis is given to chapter 2, and the technique of the split alphabet pattern is not as apparent. Chapter 3 (which has a unique structure) differs from chapters 1–2 in that the writer speaks in the first person, and yet is someone other than "personified Jerusalem." There does seem to be a division of the chapter coinciding with the midpoint of the alphabet in both chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 5 is neither acrostic nor follows the split alphabet pattern. However, a mini-acrostic is reflected in 5:19-20. An א word starts the first line of verse 19 and a כ word the second line, and the verse as a whole reiterates the theology of God's sovereignty expressed throughout the book. In verse 20, a ל word begins the first line, and a ט word begins the second line. Together they focus on the paradoxical suffering of the people of this sovereign God. Heater concludes,

So there is an alphabetic device in chapter 5 in the very verses that combine two main themes running through the book: God is sovereign and just, but Zion's suffering is so great. The split alphabet is used here to make a point, as it is used in other chapters. One reason there is no full acrostic in chapter 5 may be that the writer wanted the emphasis to fall on these two verses near the conclusion of the book. In so doing, he has adroitly drawn attention to the only hope for people in despair.⁹

Looking at the book as a whole, there seems to be a building up of the stylistic devices in chapters 1–3 and a diminution in chapters 4 and 5. This (along with the fact that the strongest acrostic pattern is found in ch 3) tends to highlight chapter 3 as the focal chapter of the book. Regarding chapter 3, Heater writes,

Chapter 3 reaches a crescendo of both despair and hope. The triple lines of the alphabet clang on the reader's ears, crying for him to see the agony of the writer and his people. At the same time strong emphasis is placed on the mercy and goodness of God and the good that will eventually come to those who trust in Him.¹⁰

Heater concludes his article this way:

The artistry of Lamentations has been pressed into the service of practical theology. The trauma of the loss of the temple coupled with the awful suffering of the people during and after the siege resulted in a serious reexamination of faith. The crucible of suffering brought forth both the fine gold of a recognition of God's justice in bringing judgment on Judah, also a deeply felt lament urging Yahweh to act in accord with His ancient covenant with His people.¹¹

⁹Homer Heater, Jr., "Structure and Meaning in Lamentations," *BibSac* 149:595 (Jul-Sep 1992): 311.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 312.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 315.

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

While "joy" should be characteristic of every Christian's life (and it is the fruit of the Spirit!), there is also a place for *lament* in our lives. Life does indeed have its sad and somber moments, just as the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon represented the darkest hour of Old Testament history. Yet even in such times, our Lord is with us. There are certainly valleys that we must go through during our Christian pilgrimage that will be full of pain and overwhelming grief. In such times, however, we may learn our greatest lessons about the grace and love of God. Tucked away in the middle chapter of Lamentations is one of the most beautiful statements of the Bible:

"The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness" (Lam 3:22-23).

What a consolation to those who experienced the tragic days of Jeremiah when the kingdom was destroyed by the Babylonians! We may not like or wish for the dark valleys we must walk through, but one thing we can be assured of: our Lord will always be there with us . . . faithfully with us . . . even to bestow on us afresh His lovingkindness (*hesed*) and compassion. He is a wonderful Savior, and I trust your soul knows that well.