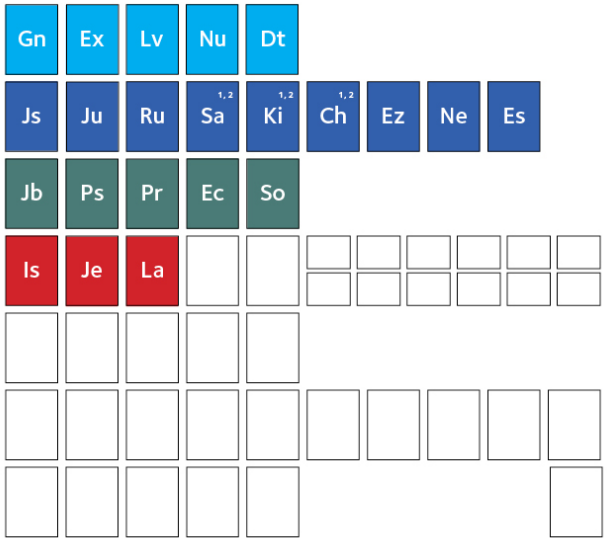
One Bible One Year
Lamentations



Summary

Lamentations is the third book of the prophets but in contrast to Jeremiah and Ezekiel that it sits between, adopts a lament style and poetic literary structure. It is a book of 5 poems, each Lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people of Israel to Babylon. As such, the writing of the book is dated around 575BC.

Lamentations is set in the context of the destruction and the writer speaks to the people sharing his experience and the emotional impact it has had upon him, as John L. Mackay describes:

"It is the present which dominates the thoughts of Lamentations, with it's repeated portrayal of Zion's pain and grief as the city endured the economic, social and political upheaval of enemy occupation and oppression. Indeed, the audience to whom the work is addressed is obviously the group presently enduring suffering. However, in all their affliction, the paramount question facing the community was religious. Their previous pattern of belief and expectation had been shattered. In retrospect it was evident that the Lord's actions against them had been justified, but there remained a lack of clarity as to where that now left them. Had God finally and completely broken off his relationship with them? Would there ever be an end to the indignities imposed on the community? to the agony? to the desolation? Could there possibly be a way forward to restoration?

Through the measured structure of it's poems Lamentations seeks to stem the swirling bewilderment and dismay which afflicted Zion, and to erect a framework in which thought can occur and where, perhaps, hope can be regained."

The 5 chapters are 5 independent poems. Each poem has 22 verses, corresponding to the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet with the first 4 poems being alphabetically acrostic.

Themes

The five laments focus on the author's sadness over the devastation of his people and his homeland. Throughout these laments there is clear communication that the fate of the people was a judgement from God, due to their clear and persistent violation of the covenant, as R.K Harrison Says:

"The recognition of national sin as the real cause of destruction brought with it a pressing consciousness of guilt, and this in turn impels the author to make full confession of sin on behalf of the apostate people and their leaders as the first step towards claiming divine forgiveness and restoration... he recognises that divine judgement is a complement to divine righteousness and laments over the grave folly of a covenanted people being so wilful and indifferent as to have lived so long in unawareness of the fact"

In the midst of the lamenting of judgement there is still a beacon of light for the future reconciliation of the people of Israel to their God. In chapter 3 the author sets his mind on God and says that despite living through so much anguish:

22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
23 They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him.'
25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;
26 it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.

Outline

I. Jerusalem's Misery and Desolation (ch. 1)
II. The Lord's Anger against His People (ch. 2)
III. Judah's Complaint - and Basis for Consolation (ch. 3)
IV. The Contrast between Zion's Past and Present (ch. 4)
V. Judah's Appeal for God's Forgiveness (ch. 5)

Further thinking

Read 3:1-66
This chapter focuses on a lament for being cast away from God.
• How is this experience described?
• How in your experience or the experience of others does this feel like?

What do we lament about?
- Moral failure
- Sickness
- Depression
- Wounded in love
- Bereaved or unemployed
- Distant from God (dark night of the soul).

How does calling to mind 3:22-24 help us?

Read Psalm 22
What does this psalm lament and where does the writer's hope come from?

Read Psalm 51
How does this lament for sin turn to a prayer for joy?

Read Romans 8:18-39
How does the good news of salvation and new life through Jesus give us hope in the midst of hardship?

Read Hebrews 4:9-16; 10:19-25; 12:1-13
How does the resurrection of Jesus and his living presence with us give us hope in the midst of hardship?