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Lamentations: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

The Book of Lamentations, as its name makes clear, is a series of laments. What do you say after the world has collapsed, after the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed by its enemies, as the whole theological framework of a regime is thrown into uncertainty? The Book of Lamentations explores the impact, both theological and psychological, of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The Book of Lamentations is written in a mixed poetic form, with various genres interwoven.

We see elements of the Dirge, for instance, the first line being one example of this,

communal complaint, prayer, and other forms all bound together. Most notably, most of the Book of Lamentations is written in an acrostic form, but with some variations. Chapter 1 follows a different alphabetical order than chapters 2 to 4, with the orders of the Hebrew letters Peh and Ein reversed.

Tighter acrostic structure can be seen in chapter 3, in which each line, and not just the first line in the verse, begins with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. There are other variations. For instance, there are four lines instead of the typical three in verse 7 of chapter 1 and in verse 19 of chapter 2. There are other examples of acrostic poetry in scripture.

Psalms 119 is perhaps the most famous. But other forms of acrostic poetry can be found elsewhere in the Psalms. In places like Psalms 111 and 112, the literary form invites the juxtaposition of statements between two successive Psalms.

Johann Renkema makes the argument that there are connections to be observed across the acrostic poems of Lamentations as well. A further famous example of acrostic poetry in scripture is found in Proverbs chapter 31, the concluding passage of the book that concerns the virtuous woman. Such a form might have been chosen as an aid to memory.

It's also a way of conveying a sense of completeness. The acrostic poetry of Lamentations covers the sorrows of Jerusalem from A to Z. Within the poetry of Lamentations, lines usually have two unequal segments, with the first one word longer than the second. William Shay has gone to the point of arguing that the 3-2 structure of the poetic lines structures the book as a whole on a chapter level.

If this is the case, it might help to explain why chapter 5, although having 22 verses, as we would expect from an acrostic poem in Hebrew, is not actually ordered alphabetically. If Shay is right, and his argument is a promising one, then it goes beyond merely supporting the unity of the book, to suggesting that this unity is a highly structured and purposive one, which will reward close attention. The genre of the city lament, as we see in Lamentations, is not exclusive to scripture in the Ancient Near East.

There are other instances of such poetry across a vast period of time. Within the Hebrew canon, this book is part of the writings, and more specifically one of the five scrolls, along with Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes and Esther, all books that are associated with particular feasts or fasts. Lamentations, unsurprisingly, is associated with Tisha B'Av, a fast commemorating various calamities to befall the Jewish nation, from the people's failure to enter into the Promised Land onwards.

Despite its position in the Hebrew canon, authorship has traditionally been attributed to Jeremiah, but this is by no means certain, nor does scripture demand such an attribution. There are various arguments in favour. First of all, Jeremiah is associated with laments.

In 2 Chronicles 35, verse 25, Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Jeziel, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Jeziel in their laments to this day. They made these a rule in Israel. Behold, they are written in the laments.

There is also similar material to this in the book of Jeremiah. We might think here of Jeremiah's complaints or confessions. Jeremiah was also on the scene after the destruction of Jerusalem, so he would have been well situated to write such a book.

His theology is similar to that of the book of Lamentations. He uses similar figures of speech, and as SR Driver notes, there are several examples of shared phrases. There are, however, arguments that push in the other direction.

There is unique vocabulary in the book of Lamentations that is not found in the entirety of the book of Jeremiah. The acrostic style is not something that Jeremiah uses elsewhere. Indeed, some have doubted that Lamentations itself is the work of a single author.

Chapters 3 and 5, in particular, have features that might set them apart from the other chapters. Others have argued that Lamentations draws at certain points upon the book of Ezekiel, which, as it postdates Jeremiah's presumed death, would rule out Jeremiah's authorship. However, it's possible that even if Ezekiel was an influence, that that influence came prior to the completion of the book of Ezekiel as we have it in the canon.

Furthermore, if we look in the book of Jeremiah, we find several examples of funeral laments, such as those in the book of Lamentations. Wherever we come down on these questions, no claim of Scripture itself is at stake here. Nevertheless, it's not unreasonable to believe that Jeremiah himself was the author, or even someone close to Jeremiah.

Perhaps, at the least, we would expect that someone like Jeremiah was the author. The first half of chapter 1 gives a more third-person account of Jerusalem's desolation, which switches to a first-person account from Jerusalem herself in the second half. A common theme throughout is Jerusalem's lack of comfort.

Wherever she looks, there is no one to comfort her. There's also the frequent appearance of the term *all*, with reference to various things, representing the utterness and totality of Jerusalem's devastation. The first verses express the series of reversals that Jerusalem has experienced.

She was once full of people, and now sits lonely. While she was once great among the nations round about, she is now like a widow, bereft and abandoned. She was once like a princess, but has now become a slave.

She has been abandoned by all of the people that she once looked to, and trusted in, her friends and her lovers. Her lovers here are probably the surrounding nations after whose

gods she went, and with whom she tried to form political alliances. We find similar expressions in places like Jeremiah chapter 22, verses 20 to 22.

But you said, I will not listen. This has been your way from your youth, that you have not obeyed my voice. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity.

Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil. Judah has been sent away into affliction and hard servitude in exile, and she is now scattered among the nations, dispersed among the peoples. Her attempts to escape were futile.

We might here recall Zedekiah's short-lived attempt to escape from the Babylonians as the city fell to them. From the reversal suffered by Jerusalem in the first few verses, we move to the lack of life and the bereftness of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a site of pilgrimage, especially during the three pilgrimage feasts.

Yet roads that would once have been full of people coming to the feast, and gates through which pilgrims would once have thronged, are now silent and empty. In the curses and the blessings of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28, one of the blessings of obedience was that Israel would become the head, and one of the curses was that their enemies would become the head, and that they would be the tail. Here Zion mourns that her enemies have become the head over her.

She has been bereft of her children. They've been taken away as captives. Her majesty has departed, perhaps most notably the temple and the presence of the Lord within it, but also the sovereignty that Jerusalem used to enjoy, and the great and grand buildings, and the royal splendor, and the pomp that would have expressed it.

All of this has been stripped from her. Jerusalem had to go on the run from her pursuers, but yet was easily overtaken as she lacked the strength. Jerusalem is painfully afflicted by the memories of the things that she once enjoyed.

The Lord had blessed and enriched Jerusalem in so many ways, and yet she had defied him and disregarded his word. Here the narrator talks about Jerusalem's defilement. On account of Jerusalem's sin, she had become unclean.

The metaphor of nakedness here is used. Nakedness is associated with shame. It's also expressive of vulnerability, of stripping of finery, and also of disclosing the true character of something.

All of these things have befallen Zion, and as a result she is despised by everyone. Her uncleanness and her sin clings to her. It's in her skirts.

Similar language is found in Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 34. Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the guiltless poor. You did not find them breaking in.

As she is despised by her neighbors and people who once sought her out, she looks for help. There is no comforter. There's no one to come to her aid.

She calls out to the Lord, yet he has turned his back upon her. In her desolate condition, Jerusalem is struggling to survive. The enemy has taken those things that were once precious to her, the treasures of the city, but also her children.

The Gentile enemies of Jerusalem entered into the sanctuary itself and defiled it. According to Deuteronomy chapter 23, they were forbidden from entering, but yet they had done so nonetheless. In addition to the violation of the temple, Jerusalem experiences the shame and the indignity of falling to such a low status.

The family treasures are being pawned, and the children are being sold into slavery merely to give her the bread that she needs to eat. Hers is a most pitiable condition. In verse 12, her own voice enters, expressing her devastation and her profound distress.

Her distress, she contends, is greater than that of any other, and in the second half of the chapter, it is clearly expressed that it is the Lord that has brought this upon her. Her condition is the result of the Lord's fierce anger. She describes the Lord sending fire into her bones, a metaphor that Jeremiah uses in his prophecy in chapter 20 verse 9. The Lord acts like someone trying to trap or snare her.

He has turned into her enemy. Jeremiah talked about the yoke of the king of Babylon that would be placed upon Judah. Here, Jerusalem speaks of a yoke of her own sins that were formed by the Lord.

The Lord formed this yoke and placed it upon her, making her subject to a nation far greater than she could withstand. The Lord is the architect of Jerusalem's downfall. Jerusalem describes her destruction as like the Lord summoning a great festival within her, but a festival in which her enemies would destroy her, the Lord himself trampling Jerusalem like a winepress.

The narrator describes the situation of Zion once again in verse 17, before we hear the voice of Jerusalem entering in again. Jerusalem's pathetic and poignant situation is described in terms of a lack of comforters again, and the fact that the Lord, the one to whom she should have looked, has commanded this against her. In Psalm 51 verse 4, the psalmist confesses, Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Lamentations chapter 1 concludes with a similar confession. The Lord is in the right. Jerusalem has rebelled against the Lord, and her terrible condition is testimony to the Lord's justice.

She calls to other peoples to look upon her and take pity upon her, and then she calls to the Lord, the one who struck her, seeking his forgiveness and mercy. She acknowledges

her transgression and her rebellion, petitioning the Lord to look upon her and have compassion. The other nations to which she turned for compassion have looked upon her and far from comforting her, they have rejoiced in her downfall.

At the end of the prophecy of Jeremiah, Jeremiah speaks of the judgment upon the nations. The Lord will judge his people, but he will also judge the other nations. Here Jerusalem expresses her desire that the Lord would judge these other peoples, those who have marked her fate, those who rather than learning from her fate and repenting in fear, have boasted over her in their pride.

The Lord, in establishing his righteousness and expressing his compassion for his people, will bring down those nations too. A question to consider, why is lament so rare within the life of the contemporary church? As in the case of chapter 1, Lamentations chapter 2 follows an acrostic form, albeit not as pronounced as it will be in chapter 3. While chapter 2 can stand alone as a lament poem, complete in itself, it also picks up many of the themes and various pieces of imagery from the preceding chapter. It focuses particularly upon the severity and totality of the Lord's judgment.

Once again, the acrostic form invites us to think in terms of a complete account of a particular aspect of Jerusalem's downfall. In the preceding chapter, there were alternating voices. The first was the voice of the narrator and then there was the first person voice of Jerusalem.

In this chapter, it begins with a third person description of Jerusalem in verses 1-10, then a first person speech speaking of Jerusalem in the third person in verses 11-12, and then addressing her directly in 13-19, followed by a first person speech of Jerusalem herself in verses 20-22. The strong literary structure of the chapter is seen even further in the chiasm or bookended structure that Johann Renkemer has noticed within it. Paul House mentions this in his commentary.

Verses 1 and 22 stress the day of the Lord's anger. Verses 2 and 21 mention God's lack of mercy. Verses 3 and 20 include consuming imagery.

Verses 4 and 19 use the phrase pour out. Verses 5 and 18 are connected by the use of the word Lord or Adonai. Verses 6 and 17 use the name Lord in the sense of Yahweh.

Verses 7 and 16 mention the enemies of Israel. Verses 8 and 15 use the word daughter. Verses 9 and 14 mention prophets and visions.

Verses 10 and 13 mention daughter Zion. And then verses 11 and 12 at the centre of the chiasm describe fainting in the street. The chapter begins by describing the devastating impact of the wrath of the Lord.

The Lord brought the destruction of Jerusalem upon it and the destruction is utter and complete. In three powerful verses it describes the annihilation of the glory of Zion. The

Lord has not remembered his footstool.

The footstool of the Lord is especially associated with the Ark of the Covenant, by extension the Temple, and even further with Jerusalem itself. We see its connection with the Ark of the Covenant and perhaps also with the Temple in 1 Chronicles 28.2. Then King David rose to his feet and said, Hear me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building.

The splendour of Israel rose up to heaven, but the Lord has cast it down to earth. The Lord has cast down, he has swallowed, he has broken down, he has brought down, he has cut down, he has withdrawn, he has burned, he has brought just about every form of destruction upon Jerusalem. And this is all an expression of the Lord's anger, his wrath, his fierce anger.

The burning fury of the Lord has come upon Jerusalem, and she is now utterly dishonoured. In verse 3 we read of the Lord withdrawing from Judah his right hand when their enemy fights against them. In verses 4 and 5, this withdrawn right hand, the hand that empowered and equipped them to fight against their foes, is not just withdrawn, it is now wielded in service of their enemies.

If it weren't already clear enough from verses 1 to 3, which focused upon the destruction wrought by the Lord, in verses 4 to 5 it focuses upon the fact that the Lord himself has become the enemy of Jerusalem. He is not just indifferent and withdrawn from her, his anger burns against her, and he is warring against her through her enemies. Verses 6 to 7 express the fact that the temple of the Lord has been in a special focus of the Lord's wrath.

The Lord has obliterated his sanctuary, summoning the enemies of his people as if in some great festal day in order that it might be utterly destroyed. In considering the reason for the Lord's destruction of his sanctuary, our mind might be drawn back to places like Isaiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 15 and 24 to 26. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts.

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me, new moon and Sabbath, and the calling of convocations.

I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me.

I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from

you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. Therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel, Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself from my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. As Jeremiah had taught in his great temple prophecy back in chapter 7 of his book, Jerusalem had started to treat the temple as a sort of talisman, as if it were a den of robbers that they could retreat to to find security against pursuit of justice, rather than a place of true worship of the Lord and a house of prayer for all nations.

As a result, they were like an occupying force within the Lord's house that he wanted to remove in destroying his sanctuary. The Lord was granting himself relief from this abomination that was constantly before his face. The description of the destruction of the house of the Lord is similar to that found in Psalm 74 verses 4 to 8. Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place.

They set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees and all its carved wood. They broke down with hatchets and hammers.

They set your sanctuary on fire. They profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. They said to themselves, we will utterly subdue them.

They burned all the meeting places of God in the land. Verses 8 to 9 make clear that this was a purposeful act of destruction. The Lord had determined to bring this ruin upon Jerusalem.

He stretched out the measuring line, as we see in Amos chapter 7 verses 7 to 9. This is a preparation for an act of judgment. This is what he showed me. Behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.

And the Lord said to me, Amos, what do you see? And I said, a plumb line. Then the Lord said, behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. I will never again pass by them.

The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. And I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. In these verses, the Lord is breaking down the buildings, the walls, the gates, and all of the defenses of the city.

As we move beyond the beginning of verse 9 and into verse 10, the utter demolition of Jerusalem is described not just as the demolition of a walled city, but also of the entirety

of its polity. Her king and her princes are removed from the land, either in captivity in Babylon or as refugees among the nations. The law is no more.

This presumably is associated particularly with the priests who would have taught and upheld the law among the people. The word of the prophets has been silenced. The Lord does not speak to them and they are struck down.

Not just the rulers, but the general population have been devastated. The elders, the people who would be looked to for wisdom and counsel, who would represent the tradition and the continuation of the past, they are in a state of mourning. Likewise, the young women, who were the group most associated with youth, beauty, the future, and joy, their songs have been silenced, their dancing has stopped, and now they too sink down to the ground in a state of mourning.

In verse 11, the voice switches to the first person. Perhaps this is the voice of Jeremiah the prophet. The sort of expressions that we read in these verses are very similar to those we find in places like Jeremiah chapter 8, verses 19 to 22.

Behold the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land. Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her? Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded.

I mourn and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? The poet describes the slow death of infants in the city, fainting of hunger, and then expiring on their mother's breasts. The voice of the lamenting poet now turns to address Jerusalem herself.

He vainly struggles to try and think of some comparison by which he could take the measure of her suffering, but it is a futile quest. Words are completely insufficient to do justice to the extent of her shatteredness. Verse 14 describes the way that the false prophets played such a role in bringing about her ruin.

We see these figures throughout the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah struggles trying to deal with these false prophets and their words of false peace by which they discouraged Jerusalem from any sort of real repentance, dulling their ears to the true voice of the Lord delivered through Jeremiah. Some commentators have observed the similarity between the first half of verse 14 and Ezekiel chapter 13 verses 1 to 16.

In verse 1 to 6 of that chapter we'll get a sense of the similarities. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are prophesying, and say to those who prophesy from their own hearts, Hear the word of the Lord. Thus

says the Lord God, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing.

Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel. You have not gone up into the breaches or built up a wall for the house of Israel that it might stand in battle in the day of the Lord. They have seen false visions and lying divinations.

They say, declares the Lord, when the Lord has not sent them, and yet they expect him to fulfill their word. Some have argued on the basis of these resemblances that the book of Lamentations must be dated to a point after the book of Ezekiel. However, the prophecies of Ezekiel would have been circulating prior to the completion of the book, so it need not be dated later.

The lamenting poet now describes the response of the enemies of Judah. They mock and hiss at the city. They gloat over her downfall and take pride in their part in it.

The poet makes clear that it is the Lord that has brought this fate upon Jerusalem. She must take it as the Lord's action, not just as something that her enemies have done to her. The appropriate response is described in verses 18 and 19.

Weeping in repentance and desolation, entreating the Lord to take some compassion upon her. The voice of Jerusalem re-enters in verses 20 to 22. She cries out to the Lord, declaring the horrors that she has seen.

One of the most gruesome signs of judgment, one of the great curses upon Israel, in the curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 56 to 57, is women eating their own children. The most tender and refined woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground, because she is so delicate and tender, will be grudged the husband she embraces, to her son and to her daughter, her afterbirth that comes out from between her feet, and her children whom she bears, because lacking everything she will eat them secretly, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in your towns. In 2nd Kings chapter 6, an example of this is described in the city of Samaria.

Besides this, priests and prophets have been killed in the sanctuary of the Lord. Dead bodies lie littered throughout the city, victims of the day of the Lord's wrath. The day of the Lord's judgment is described, again, like a festival day, that the Lord invited all these different nations to, in order that he might destroy his people, that he might visit upon them the destruction that they deserved.

A question to consider. In verses 6 and 7, we see described the special fury that the Lord had against his sanctuary. The sin of Judah that had been paraded before the Lord in that place, made it an especial abomination to him, and a particular object of his judgment.

Where else in scripture do we see the judgment of the Lord being especially focused upon the worship of a sinful people? Like the chapters that preceded, Lamentations chapter 3 has an acrostic pattern, although it is more pronounced than chapters 1 or 2. It has 22 sets of three lines. Each set of three lines begins with the same letter, in alphabetical sequence through the Hebrew alphabet. It's the central section of the entire book.

It doesn't have the same dirge elements of the other chapters of the book, but it does have elements of instruction, individual and communal lament, and wisdom. Its more disparate structures and genres mean that the unity of the chapter is most readily apparent in the tightness of its literary structure. If we look more closely, we'll also see the unity of a movement.

Within the chapter, there are a number of changes and points of view. It begins with the first person singular speech in verses 1 to 24, moves to third person masculine speech in verses 25 to 39, then to first person plural speech in verses 40 to 47, before reverting to first person singular speech in verses 48 to 66. These changes in point of view represent natural transitions in the material of the chapter, but they don't require a change in the speaker, as the same person is almost certainly speaking throughout.

It is very important to recognize the transitions, however, as they represent psychological transitions in the speaker. There are other striking transitions to be noted. For instance, the first 21 verses alternate between the first person singular of the speaker's references to himself, and continual third person masculine singular references to the Lord's acting and devastating judgment upon him.

But the name of the Lord only appears once, in verse 18. In verses 22 to 39, the I and Me of the speaker disappears, and third person masculine singular references to the righteous sufferer join the third person masculine references to the Lord. But now the Lord is repeatedly named, not merely appearing in pronouns as he or him.

This section involves a wisdom-flavoured reflection upon the manner of wise suffering, and what the sufferer has learned from it. The transition here is noteworthy. It's followed by a movement into the first person plural references to the people, especially in exhorting them to turn back to the Lord, while the references to the Lord start to shift to a second person singular form, you.

What may seem to be just meaningless changes in pronouns actually traces the movement of the heart of the writer. The tensions of the chapter are finally resolved as the speaker resituates his first person references in a hopeful second person address to the Lord, in which the Lord's name is repeatedly mentioned. This chapter, which is the pivotal chapter of the book, thus represents a movement from the voice of futile lament to a positive and hopeful address to the Lord.

The intensity of the first person singular crisis that opened the chapter, where the Lord's identity is largely eclipsed by the bitterness of the speaker's experience, is answered by the intensity of the confident address of that person to the Lord at the end, where the Lord is foregrounded and the speaker retreats to the background. In the first half of the passage, the speaker shifts from a description of his experience of suffering and the heaviness of the Lord's hand upon him to a discussion of how a person should respond in such circumstances of the Lord's steadfast love and character and how the Lord acts towards such sufferers, reminding himself of the Lord's goodness. Perhaps one of the greatest questions hanging over our reading of the text is the identity of the man who describes his experience from verse 1 onwards.

While the book of Lamentations is about the desolation of Jerusalem and the captivity of Judah, the speaker here presents himself as the direct personal target of God's wrath. Comparing chapter 2 verses 11 to 19 with chapter 3 can be illuminating, as there are several similarities to be observed between these earlier verses and sections of chapter 3, for instance the resemblance between chapter 2 verse 11 and chapter 3 verses 48 to 51. The speaker in chapter 2 verse 11 closely identifies with Jerusalem's suffering, even if not with the intensity that we see at the beginning of chapter 3. The speaker of the opening verses of this chapter seems to have been singled out by the Lord for judgment, despite the fact that the judgment in question was one that fell upon the entire people.

He stands for the whole people, even though he is just one person. He doesn't seem to be a personification of Jerusalem or Judah, nor a generic person. I'm inclined to hear the voice of Jeremiah himself here, representing the entire people in himself.

Jeremiah is the suffering prophet, and large sections of the book of Jeremiah describe the sufferings of the prophet himself, often in the most charged language. For instance, Jeremiah is led as a lamb to the slaughter in chapter 11 verse 19 of his prophecy. Jeremiah is a man who, in contrast to most of the rest of the prophets, consistently bears his soul.

He describes the heaviness with which the message of the Lord lies upon him, in chapter 20 for instance. He also has a number of individual laments, or complaints, or confessions, as they have been called, of the type that we find in the Psalms. Jeremiah is the weeping prophet, the one established by God to stand against the people of his day as a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, but who is also established to stand for the people, as he takes their suffering upon himself.

In Lamentations chapter 3, I believe that we are seeing an aspect of this. Jeremiah is the prophet who feels the painful blows of the judgment of the Lord before they fall upon the people. In Lamentations chapter 3, he is giving voice to his experience.

The speaker has been made to dwell in darkness like the dead on account of God's wrath. He has repeatedly been struck by the hand of the Lord, just as the city was

besieged and enveloped by the Babylonians, so the prophet was besieged and enveloped by divine judgment. He has been brought down, as it were, to the state of the dead.

God brought the prophet into darkness. He also cornered him, blocking off all of his paths. God, the unnamed adversary of the prophet, acts towards the prophet as a hunter towards its prey, tracking him down, lying in wait for him, and destroying him.

God has given him bitterness and gravel to eat. The bitterness might remind us of the bitterness of the herbs of the Passover connected with Israel's affliction in Egypt. He has lost all peace and his old hope in the Lord has perished.

It's crisis time, and how will he respond? In the verses that follow, the prophet moves beyond the crisis of his lament and the extinguishing of his hope to refounding his confidence upon the character of God, beginning to address the Lord. He rediscovers his confidence by reflecting upon the Lord's covenant, faithfulness and mercies, reversing his loss of hope in verse 18. God's character is unchanging despite the prophet's crisis.

God's steadfast love and mercies never come to an end, but they are also new every morning. They're everlastingly renewed. They never grow old or fade.

Some people imagine God as if he were an old man in the heavens, but the eternity of God is a youthful thing, a constant bubbling up where possibilities aren't exhausted, nor do they fade or become threadbare. They are always being restored. We may grow old, but God does not.

The prophet turns to this God as his portion and consequently his hope. Even as the earthly inheritance of Israel crumbles and perishes before its enemies, the Lord who is their portion endures in his unaltered youthfulness. Having so refounded his hope, the prophet turns to reflect upon what is good.

Each verse from verse 25 to 27 begins with the word good, recognizing at the outset God's goodness, not just in a bare objective sense, but also in a relational sense that God is good to those who wait for and seek him. He turns to the goodness of acting accordingly, waiting patiently for God's salvation and bearing his judgment. In this section, the first person singular of the prophet has been replaced by a third person masculine singular, as the prophet is drawn beyond the immediacy of his own suffering to reflect upon enduring truths in a wisdom-like discourse.

These claims are followed by a threefold general exhortation to the sufferer, which the prophet clearly is applying to his own experience. He ought to sit alone in silence, taking up the language used to describe the city of Jerusalem itself in chapter 1 verse 1, submitting to judgment and taking its blows upon himself. From this, the prophet articulates a threefold rationale in the next section, each beginning with four.

The Lord will not cast off forever. Though he causes grief, he will have compassion. Finally, the Lord does not take delight in afflicting men.

He wishes to bless them. God does not want to crush people underfoot, to deny them justice or to prevent their case from being heard by him. Judgment is not God's primary mode of action.

In the New Testament, and especially in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is like Jeremiah in a great many respects. He declares judgment against the temple, describing it using the words of Jeremiah as a den of robbers. He again alludes to Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 13 in his judgment on the fig tree.

In the final days of his life, he is the prophet weeping over Jerusalem and warning it of its impending judgment. He is beaten as Jeremiah. And as Jeremiah was like a lamb led to the slaughter to be cut off from the land of the living, so also was Christ.

He suffered on account of the people and with them. He felt the painful burden of the Lord's calling upon him and in places like chapter 20, he bitterly laments his life. Finally, as we have seen in Lamentations chapter 3, Jeremiah feels within himself the full force of the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem, as if he himself were the city.

Matthew's crucifixion account alludes to the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations. Taking up Lamentations chapter 3 verse 19 and chapter 2 verse 15, Matthew presents Jesus as the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem. Jesus is presented as suffering the judgment of Jerusalem's exile himself.

Jesus is the one who suffers a fate like the fate he declares will fall upon Jerusalem in the Olivet Discourse. The sky will be darkened over him. He will be surrounded by his enemies on all sides.

As the greater Jeremiah, he bears the force of the day of the Lord that awaits the unfaithful city, taking that judgment upon himself. Yet, just as Jeremiah in Lamentations chapter 3, a confidence in God, even in that deepest of tribulation and distress, enables Jesus to await the mercies and steadfast love of the Lord's new morning, a morning when the desolate city would be restored and a third day on which the destroyed temple would be raised again. As I've already noted, the psychological movement of the passage can be traced in the shifting pronouns and names.

It begins with first person singular pronouns, I and me, and a flurry of third person singular masculine pronouns in reference to God, he, his, him. But the Lord's name is not used. An inflection point in the prophet's lament arises when he starts to address himself.

He's no longer trapped in the immediacy of his trials. He can address the truth of the character of the Lord to himself and take comfort from it. In entering into conversation

with his soul, another voice can speak into his situation.

That interior voice is not the immediate voice of suffering and distress. It's a voice that can bring up the resources of memory, conscience, faith, and reason, and establish some clarifying distance upon his experience, speaking into it with insight that transcends it. As that voice takes its place in the conversation, the first person singular, the I and the me, is replaced by a third person singular, he and him, and the name of the Lord and his character pierces the darkness of the suffering prophet's distress.

The prophet now reflects upon firm truths that exceed his present situation. He can grasp onto these and live out patterns of behaviour appropriate to sufferers. Verses 25 to 30 The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him.

Let him put his mouth in the dust. There may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes.

Let him be filled with insults. The prophet goes on to acknowledge that all events ultimately come from the hand of the Lord, and that nothing exceeds the Lord's power. Both good fortune and disaster are ultimately from the Lord, and we are in no position to blame him for the punishment of our sins.

Indeed, for a living man to do so is to neglect the grace by which he continues to enjoy life. This is a source of comfort, as the prophet recognises that he and his people are not the playthings of a capricious fate, but that even the worst things that could befall them ultimately come under the providence of a gracious and good creator, who does not delight in destruction or disaster, and who can restore the sufferer and bring balm to all wounds. At this point, the sufferer also begins to recognise his own culpability.

His suffering is related to the punishment of his sins. No longer questioning the Lord's goodness, he sees his own responsibility. And at this point, a further shift can occur.

The prophet who began with the immediacy of bitter first-person lament before addressing the truth of the Lord to himself and resituating his experience in terms of more objective truths, now shifts to the first-person plural and from reflection to exhortation. Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven.

The prophet here calls people to the same self-examination and reflection that he has just been engaging in. They must stop fleeing from the Lord and return to him, presenting themselves to him in fervent prayer. And now the Lord, who was the veiled cause of the prophet's distress in the first 18 verses and the comforting object of his meditation in the verses that followed, becomes the object of personal address.

The third-person pronouns, he and him, are replaced by second-person address, you. He is no longer talking about God. He is exhorting and leading the community in praying to the Lord.

Now, when he recounts his suffering and the suffering of his people, it is no longer merely sterile lament. It is now being brought before the Lord and calling for his intervention. He has done X shifts to you have done X. When the prophet returns to the first-person singular and relates his suffering again, a new element appears.

He is now awaiting the Lord who will see his tears. His tears are no longer futile and bitter, but a sort of prayer poured out before the Lord, calling upon him to see the sufferer and to act on his behalf. He also returns to the language and imagery are being hunted with which he began the chapter.

However, now it is not the Lord who is hunting him, but his enemies. And he is seeking out the Lord in his crisis. The prophet has been flung alive into the pit, the realm of death, by those who were his enemies without cause.

He has been buried and overwhelmed as though drowning in the watery abyss of death. And in that position, he calls upon the name of the Lord. The Lord came near when the prophet called and reassured him, telling him not to fear.

The prophet can then declare with reawakened confidence and hope the Lord has taken up his cause and redeemed his life. The experience of being cast into or being trapped within the pit is one that is often employed as a metaphor in places like the Psalms. For instance, Psalm 88 verses six to seven, being cast into a pit was also an experience that Jeremiah himself personally had in Jeremiah chapter 38 when he was placed in the cistern.

The veiled he and the afflicted me with which the chapter began has become the you unveiled in salvation and the delivered me. The God that the prophet was fleeing from as his hunter in the beginning of the chapter is now the Lord that the prophet flees to in all of his distress. The deeply personal character of the deliverance that the prophet experiences at the end of the chapter mirrors the deeply personal crisis that he experiences at its beginning.

The Lord's answer to him is an assurance to the entire people that they can turn back to the Lord and find relief in the same manner. This is the pivotal chapter of the book. In this chapter, the key corner is being turned.

The prophetic sufferer who was trapped by his enemies felt the bitter blows of the Lord's punishment for the people's sins and called to the Lord in his distress. It reminds us of Jesus Christ. Jeremiah and Joseph might have called upon the Lord in the darkness of their pits using words similar to those of the Psalmist.

Daniel in the lion's den was heard by God and protected from the lion's mouths. Jonah in the watery abyss of the sea in the belly of a great fish also called upon the name of the Lord and was delivered from it. Our Saviour descended into a deeper, far more terrible pit.

A pit whose captives had never been released. However, even as the gaping maw of Sheol sought to swallow him up, Jesus looked with confidence to the Father who had afflicted him, seeking his redemption from the grave. A question to consider, how can we follow the pattern of the prophet's address to himself in this chapter, learning to move beyond the immediacy of our distress? Lamentations chapter 4 is the fourth poem describing Jerusalem's distress.

Chapter 3 moved us towards a point where Jerusalem could properly address the Lord in its grief. And this movement continues in chapter 4. Like chapters 1 and 2, it begins with the word how, with a dirge-like statement about the condition of the people. Chapters 1 and 2 are poems with 66 lines divided into 22 verses, each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Chapter 3's acrostic pattern is even more pronounced still. Each successive set of three lines all begin with a particular letter of the alphabet, an alphabetical sequence. Like these other chapters, chapter 4 also has an acrostic pattern.

But here there are only two lines per verse, making 44 lines instead of 66. And only the first line of each verse follows the acrostic pattern. Within this chapter there are four principal speeches, verses 1 to 10, 11 to 16, 17 to 20, and 21 to 22.

Once again there are different speakers, but it's not always clear who is the person speaking. Is the first person singular within the third person narration in verses 1 to 16, indicative of an individual member of the community speaking? Or is Jerusalem herself speaking? Is the voice in verses 11 to 16 the voice of someone in the community, or of a more detached narrator? Some clues to answering these questions can be discovered in comparable passages elsewhere in the book. The chapter begins by speaking of the way that the glory of Jerusalem had become dimmed.

Once pure gold, that gold has become tarnished. While gold would not be tarnished, this gold has decreased in its splendor. In addition, the holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street.

What the holy stones are is not immediately obvious. Some have suggested a reference to the precious stones that are part of the garments of the high priest, and other precious stones associated with the temple. Perhaps a more natural interpretation would be as a reference to the stones of the temple itself.

A further possibility that this is a reference to the people of Jerusalem is raised in part by

the verse that follows. The precious sons of Zion might be related to the precious stones of Zion. They're now regarded as of little value, as earthen pots.

Here we might recall Jeremiah's symbolic action in Jeremiah chapter 19 verses 1 to 11. Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place, that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.

Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known. And because they have filled this place with the blood of innocence, and have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Tofeth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.

And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air, and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at.

Everyone who passes by it will be horrified, and will hiss because of all its wounds. And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters. And everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. In the distress of the siege which led to extreme famine, the people became desperate and cruel as a result, no longer even showing maternal tenderness. Mothers were not feeding their young, even abandoning them.

Other women, as we see later in the chapter, would even eat their children. The example of the ostrich's lack of maternal care is also found in Job 39, verses 13-16. The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are they the pinions and plumage of love? For she leaves her eggs to the earth and lets them be warmed on the ground, forgetting that her foot may crush them, and that the wild beast may trample them.

She deals cruelly with her young, as if they were not hers. Once again, dying infants and starving children are presented as a particularly powerful image of the desperation of the city of Jerusalem and its people. In Lamentations 2, verses 11-12, My eyes are spent with weeping, my stomach churns, my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets

of the city.

They cry to their mothers, Where is bread and wine? As they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mother's bosom. The languishing of those who are rich and powerful within the city is a further example of how far it has fallen. Those who had once dined on the best food are begging in the streets.

Those once dwelling in great palaces and dressed in the finest clothes are now in the ash heap. Verse 6 contrasts either the punishment of Jerusalem with that of Sodom, or its iniquity, most likely its punishment. Sodom's judgment came suddenly, Jerusalem's was painfully drawn out, far preferable to be taken quickly than to suffer such a long and devastating judgment as that experienced by Jerusalem in the siege and the famine and the pestilence.

Verses 7-10 continue this description of the terrible condition that certain members of the city have fallen into. The group described in verse 10 has been variously understood as young men, as Nazarites or as princes. If they are Nazarites, the point is presumably that the most religiously devoted of the city are suffering so terribly.

If it's the case for the princes, it's the juxtaposition between their earlier riches and their current lack. And if it is the young men, it is the demise of the handsome and hearty youths that is particularly in view. Starving due to the famine, their skin has changed colour, it's become shrunken and dry, and they are now tragically unrecognisable to people who once knew them.

It might seem that they would have been far better off to have died suddenly by the sword than to suffer in such a grim fashion. Yet far more horrifying still are the lengths to which certain mothers have gone in eating their own children. This is one of the curses of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 and also in Deuteronomy chapter 28.

In 2 Kings chapter 6, in the siege of Samaria, we see a historical example of this taking place. Verses 11 to 16 seem to introduce a different voice. Verses 1 to 10 is the voice of someone within the community.

In these verses, the voice seems to be of someone slightly more detached. Verse 11 describes the cause of the city's downfall. The Lord gave full vent to his wrath, he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations.

This is language that is found elsewhere in the book. Given its successful defense against Sennacherib in 701 BC, and also the way that it had rebelled against the Babylonians without yet having been destroyed, the surrounding nations might have believed that Jerusalem stood strong, that it would not be easily overcome. The cause of the destruction of Jerusalem here is particularly identified as the sins of her prophets and

the iniquities of her priests.

It was on account of the sins of the religious leaders that the city was destroyed. The prophets had engaged in false prophecy, the priests had compromised the worship of the temple. However, here it is their shedding of the blood of the righteous that is particularly singled out.

One might think back to Jeremiah chapter 26, where Jeremiah is almost put to death, and in that chapter the prophet Uriah suffers just such a fate. Verse 14 describes a group that are wandering blind through the streets defiled by blood. Is this a reference to the righteous? It is more likely still a reference to the prophets and the priests.

Defiled by the blood of their victims, they become bearers of uncleanness that have to be thrust out of society like leprous persons. While they seek sanctuary in other countries, they don't want them there either. The Lord has scattered them because he has disregarded them, just as they disregarded him in the messengers that he sent to them.

In its latter days, the kingdom of Judah had looked to Egypt for help, and yet, although there was a false dawn where it seemed that the Egyptians were going to come to their aid and the Babylonians left off the siege for a short period, there was no such help forthcoming. The Babylonians tightened the noose and when they tried to escape, they were pursued and hunted down effectively. When the Davidic king Zedekiah, in whom they had placed their trust, tried to escape, he was successfully pursued.

Members of his household were killed in front of his eyes, his eyes were removed and he was taken to Babylon. The king here is described as the breath of our nostrils, the one who gave the people life. Without him, they are dead as a nation.

He is also described as their shade, the one who protects them as they live among the nations. Now they are scattered among the nations. The imagery of the king as the one shading his people is found in Isaiah 32, verses 1-2 as well.

Behold, a king will reign in righteousness and princes will rule in justice. Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. Without the shadow of their king over them, they are subject to the harsh and unrelenting heat of Babylon, beating down upon them.

The chapter ends, however, with a turn in Jerusalem's condition. Edom, the descendants of the brother of Israel Esau, had taken advantage of Jerusalem at its lowest point, gloating over Judah as it was judged by the Lord. But its time would come too.

The cup of the Lord's wrath would pass to it. The judgment about to come upon Edom is described in Obadiah, verses 10-16. Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob,

shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever.

On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. But do not gloat over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune. Do not rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin.

Do not boast in the day of distress. Do not enter the gate of my people in the day of their calamity. Do not gloat over his disaster in the day of his calamity.

Do not loot his wealth in the day of his calamity. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives. Do not hand over his survivors in the day of distress.

For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you. Your deeds shall return on your own head.

For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, so all the nations shall drink continually. They shall drink and swallow, and shall be as though they had never been. The final verse gives a note of relief.

The punishment for daughter Zion's sins is accomplished. Edom's is still to come. The book of Joel ends on a similar note.

In chapter 3 verses 19 to 21, Egypt shall become a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness, for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the Lord dwells in Zion.

A question to consider. Why is the judgment of Edom a sign of hope and restoration for Jerusalem? With chapter 5, Lamentations ends. The shadow of the acrostic pattern remains.

There are 22 verses, but the actual substance of it is absent. There isn't the alphabetical sequence in this chapter. It is the shortest of all of the chapters of the book.

The first three chapters have 66 lines each, the fourth 44 lines, and now the final chapter just 22. William Shea has made the case that the relative length of the chapters of Lamentations and their varying use of the acrostic form is an indicator of a pattern equivalent to the meter of the typical line of the earlier chapters being played out over the book as a whole. The acrostic form of the book more generally might serve a broader purpose.

Barry Webb writes, As Dilbert Hillers has noted, the acrostic form of the poems has the effect of giving grief a shape, which is itself a kind of resolution. Grief itself, by its very

nature, is a rather formless thing. The mind of a person in deep sorrow characteristically moves in circles, returning again and again to the source of the grief, unable to leave it and unable to resolve it.

What the acrostic form does is to allow the grief to be fully expressed, and yet at the same time sets limits to it. These poems explore grief in its many and varied aspects, viewing it first from one perspective, then from another, and yet another. The whole gamut of human sorrow is explored, the A to Z of sorrow, and yet by that same acrostic pattern, the grief is shaped and led to a conclusion, a point of completeness, where everything necessary has been said, at least for the time being, and the mourner can fall silent without feeling he has been stifled.

In this sense, the acrostic form has more than aesthetic significance, it has therapeutic and pastoral significance as well. The meter of the earlier chapters, which generally involved a 3-2 pattern between each set of half-lines, is largely switched in this chapter for a balanced 3-3 pattern. The chapter describes the aftermath of the disaster and gradually moves us towards what might be a more hopeful note.

It begins by calling the Lord to take notice of the condition and the suffering of his people, as he did in the Exodus. It might remind us of some of the Psalms, like Psalm 74, verse 22, Arise, O God, defend your cause, remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day. Verses 2-18 offer a description of the state of the people, developing various aspects of their plight in succession.

In verses 2-4 they are cut off from their inheritance. In verses 5-10 they experience oppression, poverty and hunger. In verses 11-14, degradation, violation and humiliation.

And in verses 15-18, grief and the loss of sovereignty. The inheritance of the land was the Lord's great gift to his people, a sign of his favour towards them. And the loss of that inheritance, its being turned over to strangers and aliens, and people who were hostile to them as their enemies, was a bitter blow, not just on a national and economic level, but also on a covenantal level.

The people are described as having become orphans and fatherless, and their mothers like widows. This may particularly be a reference to the loss of the men of the city, in exile and also to the sword. However, since the Lord is the husband of his bride Israel, and according to a different metaphor, the father of Israel as his firstborn son, Israel's current position as the Lord has abandoned them to their fate, is similar to that of orphans and widows.

We might also here recall the first verse of the book. Along with this destitution and loss of relationship, Judah has also lost access to the resources of the land. They have to pay for the water that they drink, and the wood that they use for fuel and for construction needs to be bought from others.

They are harried by their enemies on all sides, are defenceless and lack security. In the past, they looked to Egypt and Assyria, and the consequences of those past imprudent alliances continue to be felt keenly. Elsewhere in scripture, in Ezekiel chapter 18 for instance, the Lord condemns the saying of his people, that the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge, the way that Judah was blaming the sins of their fathers for their current condition.

In verse 7, a similar claim is being made, but it's not used to deny the sin of the people themselves, that is, confess later on. It is not an attempt at blame-shifting. Rather, in this communal lament, which unlike the other chapters, has a consistent single speaking voice throughout, the people are recognizing the consequences of past sins, and the way that the idolatry and rebellion of their fathers has ramifications down to the present day.

Their fathers may have died, but the poisonous legacy that they left behind lives on. The people of the former kingdom of Judah have been so diminished in their status, that they are ruled over by slaves. The exact group or groups that are being referred to as slaves here is not entirely clear.

It might be a reference to the Babylonians, or to the authorities that the Babylonians put over them, perhaps to Jewish authorities appointed by the Babylonians, perhaps a reference to Babylonian soldiers, maybe it's a reference to Babylonian slaves over Jewish work parties, or perhaps it's a reference to the other nations round about that are preying upon them. Whatever the group is, and it might be a reference to a number of these different groups, there is no one to deliver them. The oppressors have the upper hand, and there is no one to rival them.

They suffer from famine, they struggle to get bread, and their skin is discoloured because of lack of food. One of the most common and tragic results of war is the raping of women. As the men of Judah and Jerusalem have been utterly defeated, their women can be taken and raped by the enemy with impunity.

The leaders of the people also suffer the most severe indignities, princes hung up by their hands, whether as a form of execution, or as a display of corpses. The dishonouring of the elders of the people is a further humiliation. The young men are subject to harsh labour, to the back-breaking work that usually is left to slaves and to animals.

The community life of the nation has also dried up. The old men who had been in the city gate as a place of judgment and rule have now left it, and the young men have ceased to make music. The joy of the people, perhaps associated with their worship, has ended.

Celebrations of feasts and of marriages have been silenced, and mourning and funerals take their place. The fallen crown may be a reference to Jerusalem itself, or perhaps to the sovereignty of the people more generally, or maybe more narrowly to the king himself. The people clearly recognise that this is a result of their sin.

This has befallen them, not just on account of what their fathers have done, but also on account of their own iniquities. In verses 19-20 we see the contrast between the eternality and infinitude of God and the temporality and mortality of man. God's rule endures forever, but human beings soon wither and perish, which means that the continued absence of the Lord's favour is most keenly felt.

This is directly addressed to the Lord. The people are calling upon the Lord to remember them, to take note of their suffering, to recognise all the things that they have just described, and to show his mercy towards them. We might here be reminded of places like Psalm 74 verses 1-2.

We might also think of the way that the Lord has expressed his comfort towards his people, in similar language, in Isaiah chapter 49 verses 14-15. But Zion said, The final verses are a plea for restoration to the Lord. We might again think of verses like Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 18.

The petition here is for the restoration of the relationship that the Lord once had with his people, for the re-establishment of the covenant. The final line of this chapter, of this poem, and indeed of the book, is a challenging one both to translate and to interpret, and several different readings of it have been advanced. Some translations and commentators like the ESV read it as unless you have utterly rejected us.

Others read it as a question, or have you utterly rejected us? Paul House lists several other alternative approaches. Some have read it, but rather you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us. A further alternative could be to read it as even though you had despised us greatly, and had been very angry with us.

The interpreter of this verse is then left with the challenge of determining the note on which the book ends, Is it a note of refusal, that the Lord has refused to hear the plea of his people? Is it more open-ended, not knowing exactly the way that things might work out? Is it contrasting the restoration that is hoped for with the judgment that the Lord has brought upon them in the past? Following House at this point, it seems most likely to me that this is a reference to the current situation of the people, and a confident and hopeful petition that the Lord will reverse his judgment. Understood this way, we might think back to Lamentations 3, verses 31-32. A question to consider, how does an understanding of the character of God help us better to understand his judgment?