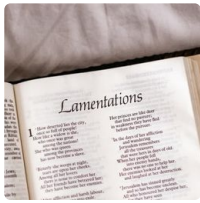


OpenTheo

Lamentations (Part 1)



Lamentations - Steve Gregg

Discover the insight and wisdom of Steve Gregg as he delves into the book of Lamentations. Examining the historical context, Gregg highlights the author, believed to be Jeremiah, and their firsthand account of the destruction of Jerusalem. Exploring the poetry and structure of the book, Gregg brings attention to the city's grievous sins and the consequences they faced. Through a careful examination of the text, this study provides a thought-provoking glimpse into the heart-wrenching lament of a nation in turmoil.

Transcript

We're going to study the book of Lamentations in this session. And by way of introduction, I'll make a few comments and we'll just go right into it. This book is a sample of a genre of Hebrew literature called Laments or Lamentations.

Lamentations or Laments were a form of sorrow over some calamity in most cases. And virtually all of the prophets in the Old Testament have examples of this form of literature. Isaiah chapter 14 is an example of that where we have a lament and almost have some . . . When you read a lament, especially if it's lamenting over one's own . . . You sort of get the impression that this person is wallowing in self-pity.

And that's the impression you get when you read the book of Lamentations. Although of course the pity is not just in the prophets lamenting over the fall of the Gentile power. As that he's using the lament as a means of emphasizing the emotion that will be felt by those who experience it.

But in this case, the writer is experiencing it himself. And who the writer is, is not mentioned. Traditionally, it has been understood from very ancient Jewish and Christian tradition that Jeremiah is the author.

Though the book is anonymous and does not claim Jeremiah or any other individual as its author. It's obviously positioned after the book in order to reflect the tradition that Jeremiah is its author. In fact, it is treated as one of the major prophets.

When the major and minor prophets are categorized in Christian speech, Lamentations is considered to be one of five. Lamentations is actually shorter than several of the minor prophets. But because it is thought to belong . . . And he is certainly a major prophet.

The longest prophetic book we have is categorized with the major prophets. Now, there seems to be more than simply tradition in favor of saying that Jeremiah is the author, though we can't be 100% certain. For one thing, the author clearly has witnessed . . . And Jeremiah at least lived at the proper time period for that.

It's clear from the . . . in 586 B.C. And prior to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple, which took place in 516 B.C. So sometime in that time period, somebody wrote this book. Jeremiah lived at the earlier part of this period and would most likely have had a chance to see a lot of this with his own eyes. Although he and others escaped to Egypt before the final destruction happened.

But he saw certainly the earlier stages and probably heard the details of the final stages of the destruction from escapees. People who fled, probably a few survivors who may have escaped to Egypt where he was. And he would have had a very clear knowledge of what had taken place.

In favor of Jeremiah being the author, it is said that the vocabulary and the style of the book are very much like that found in Jeremiah. Same vocabulary. We can also see a number of things within Lamentations that remind us a great deal of Jeremiah.

Though he's not the only person who could have said such things. For example, Lamentations 3 and verse 48. He says, My eyes overflow with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people.

Has an obvious familiar ring to it. Where he said, Oh, that my head were waters that they might overflow with tears for this slain of the daughter of my people. Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet.

One of the things that Jeremiah exhibits this weeping character is in Jeremiah chapter 14 and verse 17. Where he says, Therefore you shall say this word to them, Let my eyes flow with tears night and day. And let them not cease for the virgin daughter of my people.

And with a very severe blow. This is fairly common in Jeremiah to talk not only about the virgin daughter of my people. That expression which is found in Lamentations 3, 48.

Also Jeremiah 9. One, another example of Jeremiah. Oh, that my head were waters in my eyes a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. So this is the language of Jeremiah.

And it certainly has a familiar ring when we come to Lamentations 3, 48. It says, My eyes

overflow with tears of the daughter of my people. A very, very Jeremiah like statement.

Another example of where Jeremiah could easily be seen as the author. Is in Lamentations chapter 3. Again, in verse 53. Where the author says, well, let's start with verse 52.

My enemies without cause hunted me down like a bird. They silenced my life in the pit and threw stones at me. Now, that might be figurative.

The psalmist often speaks of being consigned to a pit. Which usually doesn't refer to a literal pit. Not just the pit is very bad.

But we know Jeremiah was literally. And for that reason, there may be a suggestion of Jeremiah being the one. Jeremiah 37, 16.

Refers to Jeremiah being lowered into a pit. Also in Lamentations chapter 4 and verse 2. It says, Precious, the precious sons of Zion, valuable as fine gold. How are they regarded as clay pots, the work of the hands of the potter.

This is reminiscent of the language of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah chapter 18. Where Israel is compared or Jerusalem is compared with the work of a potter.

The thought is a little different. But the connection is that in both places the people of Zion are compared with clay pots made by a potter. In Jeremiah 18, 4 through 6. It says, And the vessel that he made, as Jeremiah watched it, of clay was marred in the hand of the potter.

So he made it again into another vessel as it seemed good to the potter to make. Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter, says the Lord. Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

So the idea of Israel being clay or like a pot in the hands of the potter is from Jeremiah. And so also in Lamentations 4, 2 we have the same imagery. These are a few, as you read the book of Lamentations, you may well notice far more.

These are just a few examples of what seem to give support to the tradition that Jeremiah was the author. Now I think we might as well proceed on the assumption that Jeremiah is the author since no other theory has been suggested that could bear such a scene. This book is still read today, once a year in the synagogues by the Jews.

It is read on a day that is called the ninth of Ab, on the Hebrew calendar, which occurs in mid-July of our calendar. And the ninth of Ab is the traditional date of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and remarkably in 70 AD also. Twice Jerusalem was destroyed and once in 70 AD by the Romans, in both cases the traditional date was the ninth of Ab.

Now whether the tradition is completely, you know, I don't know, but it's interesting that on the two occasions in history when Jerusalem fell, the city of Horeb Haaretz was destroyed and demolished, it happened on the same day of the year. And that day, as I said, is in mid-July of our calendar and therefore the Orthodox Jews today read through aloud the book of Lamentations on that date yearly. Also some Jews read it weekly in Jerusalem at the wedding wall.

And it is also found some place in the liturgy of the Catholic Church on certain special occasions it is read as well. The structure of the book is as follows. You can notice just by glancing through that all the chapters except for chapter three have the same number of verses.

They have 22 verses, chapters one and two and then again four and five. Chapter three has exactly three times as many verses, 66 verses. Now you may be aware from your studies in the Psalms that some of the Psalms are what we call acrostic.

They are Psalms that have either 22 or 44 verses usually. And the Psalms that are written as acrostics, each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet in Hebrew. So that you run through the whole alphabet, each verse successively beginning with a different letter of the alphabet in alphabetical order.

In the case of Psalms that have 44 generally you will have two verses or three verses with the first letter. There is the one beginning with each letter. Psalm 119 as you know is arranged in sets of eight verses each.

And each set of eight has one of the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet at the head. And all the verses in each set begins in the Hebrew Bible with that letter. So this is a style of poetry that the Hebrew writers frequently employed to move through their alphabet in an acrostic style in giving an oracle.

Now in the case of these laments in this book, each chapter of the first four exactly, the fifth is an exception, but the first four chapters, and that means chapters one and two and four, each have one verse beginning with the successive letter of the alphabet, each two letters. Chapter three has three verses each for each letter. And then the fifth chapter, so we wouldn't get that of course reading it in English, but the author has organized his thoughts.

You read in the book of Lamentations a tremendous amount of emotion and passion and you might get the impression that it is spontaneously blurted out in agony, but as a matter of fact it has been carefully arranged. His thoughts no doubt have sincere emotion, but he did arrange them in this present arrangement around a set pattern, which is carefully worked out around the alphabet of the Hebrew language. I would point out also that the first three chapters really are of equal length.

Even though the third chapter has 66 verses and chapters one through to 22, each verse is three times as long. You'll notice, well you won't notice it so much in the English, but you can even notice it a bit in English, that the verses in chapters one, whereas in chapter three the verses are very short, they're actually one third as long. In the Hebrew, the verses in chapters one and two are three lines long, and the verses in chapter three are only one line long.

Now interestingly, in chapter four each verse is two lines long, which is neither like chapter two nor chapter three. Each verse in the Hebrew in chapter four is two lines long, and in chapter five, which is not an acrostic, each verse again is one line long, as is the case in chapter three. So what you have is the first two chapters, each verse is very long, and then in chapter three you have three times as many verses, but they're one third as long, so the total length of the chapter is the same length, same number of lines in the Hebrew.

And then chapters four and five, diminishing length, 22 verses each, but in each case shorter verses. Two lines in chapter four. This probably has nothing to do with the spiritual value of the book, but it is something that may be a point of interest, and something you would certainly not get from, you might not notice reading it in English, but it would be evidence in a Hebrew.

And all I can say as far as the significance is that it does bear witness to a certain plan, rather than a spontaneous crying out as takes place. Yet it would appear that the emotion in the book is very genuine, and probably it's very possible that a rough draft of the Midrash of Jeremiah, or possibly someone else, took spontaneous cry and arranged it in this more poetic way, around this acrostic structure, and that would possibly be for the sake of liturgical reading or whatever. Anyway, in the Hebrew, the name of the book is the Hebrew word for how, and this is for the same reason that Genesis is in the Hebrew Bible called In the Beginning, and Exodus is Now These Are the Names, and so forth, because the Hebrew Bible frequently gives... And the first word in chapter one is how.

By the way, that's also the case of chapters two and four. They also begin with the word how. But mainly because chapter one begins with that word, the book is called how in Hebrew.

Okay, not much more needs to be said, but we'll just get right into it. Each of the five chapters is a separate lament, and in other words, it's not a running lament of five chapters on separate occasions. The fact that each is set as an individual acrostic would indicate that each one is a unit, and they may not all just flow at one time from the author.

How lonely sits the city that was full of people. How like a widow is she who was great among the nations. The princess among the provinces has become a slave.

Now, in the typical form of Hebrew poetry, we see repetition. This is one of the main characteristics of Hebrew poetry. Basically, there's one thought stated three times.

It's not exactly the same in each case, but there's a clear relation. She that was full of people is now lonely. She that was great among the nations is now a widow, which corresponds with lonely.

Widows are lonely. She that was once the princess among the provinces... And so, we're not going to note this in all the structure, but just at the beginning, I'd like you to be aware that this... sayings that basically express the same point. And in talking about the city as a widow, it reminds us that Israel was considered to be... was to be seen as God's wife.

But now, as if God has died, it's really more properly that they have died. They're left without a husband. And Jeremiah himself spoke that way in chapters 2 and 3 of Jeremiah, about not so much of them being widowed, but being a divorce... that he had divorced them because... Verse 2. She weeps bitterly in the night.

Her tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers, she has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her.

They have become her enemies. Judah has gone into captivity. Under affliction and hard servitude, She dwells among the nations.

She finds no rest. All her persecutors overtake her in dire strains. In this case, the first two lines of this verse are parallel.

Gone into captivity parallels dwelling among the nations. Being afflicted under hard servitude parallels finding no rest. The third line is sort of a different thought.

The roads to Zion mourn because no one comes to the set feasts. All her gates are desolate. Her priests sigh.

Her virgins are afflicted. And she is in bitterness. The personification of the roads to Zion and their mourning is because they've been accustomed several times a year to accommodating pilgrims from all over the world.

Jewish people who come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and Pentecost and Tabernacles on regular set occasions, but now no one's going to Jerusalem. There's nothing there. There's nothing to go there for.

The Jews are in other countries, but they can't make pilgrimages to Jerusalem. They're not at liberty. Furthermore, even if they were at liberty, there's no Jerusalem to make a pilgrimage to.

It's all rubble. Are lonely, as it were. The roads are desolate because her enemies

prosper.

Her children have gone into captivity before the enemy. And from the daughter of Zion all her splendor has departed. Her princes have become like deer that find no pasture.

That flee without strength before the pursuer. The enemies, of course, almost always would target the leaders, princes and nobility, first to be captured. Because once they've captured, there was really no strength left, city or nation to resist.

And so it speaks of the hunting down of the princes, which the Babylonians did apparently. Like the hunting of... In the days of her affliction and roaming, Jerusalem remembers all her pleasant things that she had in the days of old. When her people fell into the hands of the enemy with no one to help her, the adversaries saw her and mocked her at her downfall.

It made their captivity the more bitter to remember how much blessing... It's always harder when you fall into calamity if you can remember good old days. Days that are gone and irretrievable. If your life has always been hard and you've always been poor, then further poverty and hardship don't really seem to be too strange.

But when you've known the blessing of God and when you... It's like the psalmist who said, you know, when I remember... You know, when I used to go to the house of the Lord with songs of praise and so forth, it grieved him because he was now in exile. And he remembered the times when he could... when he was able to go to the house of God. Just remembering those better days made the present bitterness bitter.

Jerusalem has sinned grievously. Therefore she has become vile. All who honor her despise her.

Because they have seen her nakedness, yes, she sighs and turns away. Now, just like he's, you know, indulging in self-pity and pity for his people as if for some strange reason they just suffered calamity. And he calls for vindication and he calls for judgment, as we'll see, on those who have oppressed her.

Yet, he acknowledges in some places that she deserved it. Although he wants her persecutors to be judged, he admits in many cases that they were really instruments of just retribution upon Jerusalem. Here we see in verse 8, she has sinned grievously, which is the reason that these things have happened to her.

Only occasionally does this come up. But it's important to see it. That the writer is not suggesting that some injustice has really happened to Jerusalem.

What has happened was well deserved. But it's still sad. Jesus knew in his day that Jerusalem was going to fall to the Romans.

And it would be well deserved. He said it was going to happen to them because they did not recognize the day of their visitation in Luke chapter 19. But he also wept over the city because though it was well deserved.

Her uncleanness is in her skirts. She did not consider her destiny. Therefore, her collapse was awesome.

She had no comforter. Oh, Lord, behold my affliction. For the enemy has magnified himself.

In verse 9 it says, she did not consider her destiny. Therefore, her collapse was awesome. It's rather significant, rather interesting.

Because Jerusalem had a destiny in God. They had a glorious light to the nations. And the preserver of her destiny.

But because she never appreciated her destiny, she kind of fell into misbehavior. Instead of seeing herself as, I think it's obvious that Christians also are in danger. They don't understand what the church, of just losing the divine character that God has put into the church.

And following the world and imitating the world. If we understand the destiny of the church, then we will drag down or collapse the church or cave in the church to the pressure of becoming like the world. 10.

The adversary has spread his hand over all nations. For she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary. I mean the temple, the Gentiles have come in where they ought not to be and they've destroyed the temple.

Those who you commanded not to enter your congregation. All her people sighed. They seek bread.

They have given their valuables for food to restore life. See, O Lord, and consider, for I am scorned. An apparent reference to famine probably during the siege.

The siege of Jerusalem was for a while. It fell and while we don't read in the accounts of 2 Kings or Chronicles, I don't think we read in those passages of cannibalism or the straits to which people... We read of them here. Jeremiah is describing what happened in 586 and prior to that in the famine and the siege.

And he will mention twice in this book cannibalism, people eating their own children. Now this is something that Moses said in Deuteronomy would happen. In Deuteronomy 28 he told the Jews if they departed from the covenant and made God angry with them, that he would reduce them to these conditions.

That their enemies would besiege them, they'd starve, they'd eat their own children. And

we have it from Josephus. Josephus recorded cases where this happened in 70 AD in the siege, that people ate their own children in the siege.

We have it in an earlier story, in the days of Elisha, that Samaria was under siege from the Syrians. And it is known that a woman ate her child. In fact, two women conspired together.

They would eat one's child that day and the other one's the next day. And so a woman agreed and her child was eaten and the next day the second woman wouldn't surrender her child. And so she complained to the king.

And when he learned of it, she tore his robes and he was very grieved to find out that things had become so bad that people were eating their children. There's at least, apparently three times in Jewish history when the capital cities were either grieved as famine because of siege that they ate their children. Now, lamentations I believe is the only thing we see.

We haven't come to those verses yet. But there is mention of shortage of food, which later led to such horrible atrocities as cannibalism. But in verse 11 he says, they seek bread and hats.

They've given them valuables for food just to sustain their life. It suggests, of course, that in times of great famine people give up things, diamonds, valuables, you know, things that are normally worth hundreds or thousands to survive. Verse 12, Is it nothing to you all who pass by, behold and see, if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which has been brought on me, which the Lord has inflicted on me in the day of his fierce anger.

Now here, particularly, it sounds like sort of wallowing in self-pity. Well, the fact of the matter is probably most of the other nations that were destroyed by Babylon feel the same way about themselves. You know, I mean, now this may be literally true.

It may be that the afflicted, but I would imagine any other nation reading this would say, hey, well, you should see what they did to us. You know, but Jerusalem, of course, it was more galling to them to be destroyed by heathen because they knew that they were supposed to be gods, were no gods at all. And yet this made it look as if their god was impotent in the face of those who served other gods.

And probably humiliation and perhaps a sense of guilt that their sins had brought upon God a reproach. That they had, as it were, made it seem by bringing this upon them, they bore suffering. And that would be in addition to verse 13.

From above he has set fire into my bones, and it overpowered them. He has spread a net for my feet and turned me back. He has made me desolate and faint all the day.

That is the Lord has. The yoke of my transgressions was bound. They were woven

together by his hands.

And the thrust and thrust upon my neck. He made my strength fail. The Lord delivered me into the hands of those whom I'm not able to withstand.

The Lord has trampled underfoot all my mighty men in my midst. He has called an assembly against me to crush my young men. The Lord trampling of Judah as in a winepress is an image that comes up again in the book of Revelation.

And in fact we might just take a sneak preview of that. Because Revelation, you know, there's a variety of ways of interpreting it. We'll survey several of them.

But there is a view that to my mind has, it warrants consideration. That sees Revelation as a prediction of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Of course that view, which is called the Preterist view, requires that Revelation be written before 70 AD.

And many scholars do not believe that it was written that early. But there are many scholars who believe. If Revelation was predicting the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, then a passage like Revelation 14 would be best understood in light of this imagery taken from Lamentations.

It says in verse 17 of Revelation 14, that another angel came out of the temple, which is in heaven, also having a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the altar, also having a sharp sickle, saying, thrust in your sharp sickle and gather the quarter of the earth, or it could be of the land, for her grapes are fully ripe. So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, or of the land, equally translatable that way, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.

And the winepress was trampled outside the city. The blood came out of the winepress for 1,600 furlongs. 1,600 furlongs is the actual distance from the northern to the southern boundary of Israel.

And so it seems to speak of a calamity upon Israel. But it's interesting that this is described as a harvesting of Israel, in the Old Testament and the New, in Jesus' parable. And it is thrown into the winepress of God's wrath and he tramples it.

This image is found here in Lamentations 1, 15, where it says, The Lord has trampled as in a winepress. And it would seem that Revelation 14 is just echoing this sentiment, the difference being that Lamentations is considering 586 B.C. and Revelation may be considering 70 A.D. But we know very much it's similar between those two things. In fact, one could arguably be said.

For these things I weep. My eye, my eye overflows with blood. Who should restore my life is far from me.

My children are desolate because the enemy prevailed. One of the things that makes suffering even greater is seeing your own children suffering. Many people can heroically endure personal poverty and suffering, but to see their children endure the same is... And there's a number of places in this Lamentations that speaks of the suffering of children, which is, the Lord has commanded, concerning Jacob, that their distress is something God has commanded.

They're asking in vain because the Lord has commanded that those around him the guilt and they deceive me. My priests and my... A reference to a people. See, O Lord, that I am in distress.

Outside the sword be rears. All my enemies have heard of my troubles. They are glad that they may become like me.

That is, that the enemies will become like me. The day of Babylon's destruction is the day that God has announced. He says, bring it quickly.

Like me, that is. And due to that... Okay, chapter 2. How the Lord has covered the... He cast out the beauty of Israel and did not remember... I just want to comment on this cloud. God's wrath is described... It'll become evident in studying the prophet.

...city is predicted or announced. That it is often spoken of as a time... And the stars, and sometimes even figuratively the stars. Though this could be, strictly speaking, symbolic.

It may be in some sense... And we find this said in Isaiah 13. We find it also in Ezekiel and Joel, where the destruction of various cities or empires are described, and the results, or at least one of the results mentioned... Now, that can be very figurative, but it could also be a reference to the view of the sky. We see in Ezekiel, chapter 32, a prophecy about the fall of Egypt.

And he says, in Ezekiel 32, 7 and 8, When I put out your stars dark, I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of the heavens... This is Ezekiel 32, 7 and 8. And bring darkness upon the earth. One reason I stress imagery of a nation coming under judgment, and therefore all the bright lights of heaven being made dark over it, is used also in the New Testament.

And unfortunately, because they thought that what... In Matthew 20, in a passage that I believe is 70 AD, it says, immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her its light. If you'll turn over to Acts chapter 1... No, Acts chapter 2, where Peter is quoting from Joel, and says, this is the fulfillment of that on the day of Pentecost. It's rather interesting, he quotes Joel further than some people think he should have.

When Peter is trying to explain what has happened in the upper room, in Acts chapter 2, beginning with verse 15, he says, these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it's only the

third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. Now, there's a somewhat lengthy quote from the book of Joel, in the second chapter.

He says, and it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of my spirit on all flesh, your sons, your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams, and on my maidservants and menservants I will pour out of my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath, blood and fire and vapor of smoke, or some modern terms, they say pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and notable day of the Lord.

And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Now, I bring this up because verses 17 and 18 clearly refer to the day of Pentecost, the pouring out of the spirit on all flesh, and Peter says that's what it is. But then he also continues the quote through verses 19 and 21 to discuss something that does not appear to refer to the day of Pentecost, which many people think is the end of the world, where he says, I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs on the earth beneath, blood and fire, or pillars of smoke, the sun shall be turned to darkness, the moon to be blood, before the coming of the day of the Lord.

But, why would Peter quote a passage about the end of the world on this occasion where he's saying this is that? As if it's immediately facing fulfillment. This was 2,000 years ago he quoted. If, however, we understand his use of the term last days in verse 17 to mean the last days of the Jewish economy, then what he has in view is that God is pouring out his spirit as a precursor to sending judgment on Jerusalem, which came in 70 AD.

And this would be agreeable with what John the Baptist said. John the Baptist said that Jesus would come with a double baptism, a baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire in 70 AD. You've heard me say that before, although I don't know if you remember my reading.

I can't go into it right now. But it would make perfectly good sense then for Peter to quote this if this latter description in verses 19 through 21 is talking about 70 AD and what it might, because it says there'd be fire and blood, there certainly was both in 70 AD, and pillars of smoke, and the sun being turned to darkness and the moon to blood. If you've lived in Los Angeles, any place where there's a lot of smoke in the air, or soot or smog, you've seen many times the night the moon is blood red.

I mean, it looks red because you're seeing it through the soot, you're seeing it through the smog. And sometimes the clouds can be so thick that you can't see the sun at all. And that could be quite literally the case, although there's much apocalyptic imagery too to be considered.

There's no reason why Peter's statements can't refer to 70 AD. In fact, it's most likely

they would, since he says this is that. This is the process of the... And anyway, of course, this could take us off on a tangent, which we can't afford to take.

But I bring this all up because of Lamentations 2.1, where the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC is said to be characterized by God covering the daughters of Adam with a cloud in his anger, which would, of course, on a cloudy day or a cloudy night, you can't see the sun or the moon or the stars, and it's the same kind of imagery. The cloud is a cloud of his anger, but it may well refer to the clouds of smoke that occurred when Jerusalem was burned.