

Adam Clarke:

Introduction to the Lamentations of Jeremiah

This book, like the several books of the Pentateuch, is denominated in Hebrew **עִיָּה** (eicah), how, from its first word; and sometimes **קִינּוּת** (kinnoth), lamentations, from its subject. In the Septuagint it is termed (QRHNOI TOU IEREMIOU), for the same reason. The Syriac and Arabic copy or follow the Septuagint; and so does the Vulgate, from the Lamentationes of which, the book has that name which it bears in our language. In the Chaldee it has no name; and in it, and perhaps anciently in the Hebrew, it was written consecutively with the last chapter of Jeremiah.

It is one of the books of the **מִגִּילּוֹת** (Megilloth), or Roll, among the Jews; and because it relates to the ruin of their affairs, and contains promises of restoration, it is peculiarly prized, and frequently read. The five Megilloth are: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Ruth, and Esther.

There has been little difference among learned men concerning the author of this book. The whole current of antiquity and modern times has pointed out Jeremiah as the writer: of this the style is a sufficient evidence. Mr. John Henry Pareau, in a Dissertation prefixed to his Translation and Notes on this book, (8vo. Lugd. Bat. 1790), has proved this point amply from a general collation of the prophecy of Jeremiah with select passages in this book. I have heard of but one learned man who has entertained serious doubts on the subject, Mr. Herman Van der Hardt, who has supposed the five chapters were written by Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Jeconiah. To this opinion I suppose none has ever been converted.

There has been more difference of opinion relative to the subject and occasion. Some have thought the book was composed on the death of Josiah; others that it was composed on occasion of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the various desolations connected with it. To this all its parts and its general phraseology seem best to apply; and this is the sentiment most generally embraced at present. This will receive much proof from a minute consideration of the book itself.

The composition of this poem is what may be called very technical. Every chapter, except the last, is an acrostic. Of the two first, each verse begins with a several letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in the order of the letters, with this exception, that in the second, third, and fourth chapters, the **פ** (phe) is put before the **א** (ain); whereas in all the acrostic Psalms the latter preceded the former, as it does in all grammars of the Hebrew language. In the first and second chapters each verse is composed of three hemistichs or half verses, except the seventh verse of the first, and the nineteenth of the second chapter, which have each four hemistichs.

The third chapter contains sixty-four verses, each, as before, formed of three hemistichs, but with this difference, that each hemistich begins with the same letter, so that the whole alphabet is thrice repeated in this chapter.

The fourth chapter is made up of twenty-two verses, according to the number of the Hebrew letters; but the composition is different from all the rest, for each verse consists of only two hemistichs, and those much shorter than any in the preceding chapters.

I have called this an inimitable poem; better judges are of the same opinion. "Never," says Bishop Lowth, "was there a more rich and elegant variety of beautiful images and adjuncts arranged together within so small a compass, nor more happily chosen and applied."

"One would think," says Dr. South, "that every letter was written with a tear; every word, the sound of a breaking heart: that the author was compacted of sorrows; disciplined to grief from his infancy; one who never breathed but in sighs, nor spoke but in a groan."

"Nor can we too much admire," says Dr. Blayney, "the full and graceful flow of that pathetic eloquence in which the author pours forth the effusions of a patriotic heart, and piously weeps over the ruins of his venerable country. But it was observed before that the prophet's peculiar talent lay in working up and expressing the passions of grief and pity; and, unhappily for him as a man and a citizen, he met with a subject but too well calculated to give his genius its full display." David in several places has forcibly depicted the sorrows of a heart oppressed with penitential sorrow; but where, in a composition of such length, have bodily misery and mental agony been more successfully painted? All the expressions and images of sorrow are here exhibited in various combinations, and in various points of view. Misery has no expression that the author of the Lamentations has not employed. Patriots! you who tell us you burn for your country's welfare, look at the prophecies and history of this extraordinary man; look at his Lamentations; take him through his life to his death, and learn from him what true patriotism means! The man who watched, prayed, and lived for the welfare of his country; who choose to share her adversities, her sorrows, her wants, her afflictions, and disgrace, where he might have been a companion of princes, and have sat at the table of kings; who only ceased to live for his country when he ceased to breathe; - that was a patriot, in comparison with whom almost all others are obscured, minished, and brought low, or are totally annihilated!