

Jeremiah and Lamentations

Commentary for May 1, 2012 — Two Articles for May 2012

Two articles this month again relate to the written works of Jeremiah the prophet. This prolific writer and thinker wrote the Book of Lamentations and his own prophecies, the Book of Jeremiah, along with still other writings (as indicated in the ASK Jeremiah articles). The first article this month is “Jeremiah, Part 4,” which discusses the important subject of sabbatical years, while the second article is “The Book of Lamentations.” Read the “[May 2012 Newsletter](#)” first. It contains interesting information relating to both these articles.

Jeremiah Part 4: Sabbatical Years

Israel’s and Judah’s violation and non-practice of the 70 sabbaticals was the time period of exile — 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11–12, 29:10; Daniel 9:2; Zechariah 7:5). Later the sabbatical years became part of Daniel’s prophecies, incorporated into the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel chapter 9.

Surprisingly, sabbatical years play a significant role in the background of God’s punishment of the kingdom of Judah. God says that Judah’s ignoring and not practicing the sabbatical years was a sin violating Israel’s covenant agreement with God at Sinai. That debt was to be paid (2 Chronicles 36:21).

You and I might wonder, well, if Israel did not want to observe the covenant or keep the sabbatical years, that was their right! Well, no, it was not. Israel and Judah had rights under the covenant with God only so far as they fulfilled their obligations under that covenant. If they obeyed, they had blessings. If they disobeyed, they received punishments.

“For this city has been to me as a provocation of mine anger and of my fury from the day that they built it even unto this day; that I should remove it from before my face, Because of all the evil of the children of Israel and of the children of Judah, which they have done to provoke me to anger, they, their kings, their princes, their priests, and their prophets, and the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

• ***Jeremiah 32:31–32***

Israel renewed that covenant every year at the Day of Atonement, when the sins of the nation were cleansed, if the people were sincere and obedient. If individuals did not want to adhere to God’s covenant, they could leave the land and not expect any benefits from God.¹ The land was God’s land that He gave to Israel. If they stayed in the land, they were required to adhere to the covenant stipulations and should expect punishment for violation of the covenant agreement, renewed yearly.

¹ After Israel was conquered by Babylon, a group of Jews tried to flee to Egypt and kidnapped Jeremiah and Baruch (Jeremiah chapters 42–43). It was too late. God told them not to go. Jeremiah 42:22:

“Now therefore know certainly that you shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence, in the place whither you desire to go and to sojourn.”

The time periods of the sabbatical years were understood and sabbatical years were apparently observed after Judah's return from exile, during the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, and later. The sabbatical years were kept in Christ's time until the destruction of the Temple.

Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations details through poetry the hardships that the people of Judah — all strata and all classes of society — endured in the defeat and destruction of the nation, Jerusalem, the Temple, and the people. God had warned them not to resist **"My servant"** Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 25: 9, 27:6, and 43:10). The details of the suffering are clear.

This poetry was expressed in some public form, perhaps in song during the feast on the 9th of Ab. This day of commemoration was established after the return from Babylon marking the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple. These were not feasts commanded by Moses. According to Alfred Edersheim:

"Properly speaking, there was only one Divinely-ordained public fast, that of the Day of Atonement. But it was quite in accordance with the will of God, and the spirit of the Old Testament dispensation, that when great national calamities had overtaken Israel, ... or great national sins were to be confessed, a day of public fasting and humiliation should be proclaimed. To these the Jews added, during the Babylonish captivity, what may be called *memorial-fasts*, on the anniversaries of great national calamities. ... What were idly bewailed as national calamities were really Divine judgments, caused by national sins, and should have been acknowledged as righteous, the people turning from their sins in true repentance unto God.

This, if we rightly understand it, was the meaning of Zechariah's reply to those who inquired whether the fasts of the fourth, the fifth, the seventh, and the tenth months, were to be continued after the return of the exiles from Babylon [Zechariah 7:5, 8:19]. ... the *four* great Jewish fasts, ... were observed so early as the Babylonish captivity. ... 'The fast of the fifth month,' on the 9th of Ab, was kept on account of the destruction of the first (and afterwards of the second) Temple.²

• **Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple*, pp. 338–39**

The Book of Lamentations was not simply a literary expression of the sadness of the people. Lamentations described what took place 22 years after Jeremiah gave the prophecy (after good King Josiah died). It is important to understand this fact: these events took place as Jeremiah says; the descriptions of the horrors suffered by the people were real.

These were not just stories told to scare children. Israel and Judah refused to obey God. We are to learn from their example (Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:11–12) — their negative example, and also learn from their example of suffering when they were punished for their disobedience. Learn from both of these articles.

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² Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple, Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ.*, (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2003), pp. 338–39.