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COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

Lamentations

by Matthew Henry

To the Students of the Words, Works and Ways of God:

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AN EXPOSITION, WITH PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS, OF
THE

LAMENTATIONS

OF JEREMIAH

Since what Solomon says, though contrary to the common opinion of the world, is certainly true, that *sorrow is better than laughter, and it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting*, we should come to the reading and consideration of the melancholy chapters of this book, not only willingly, but with an expectation to edify ourselves by them; and, that we may do this, we must compose ourselves to a holy sadness and resolve to weep with the weeping prophet. Let us consider,

I. The title of this book; in the Hebrew it has one, but is called (as the books of Moses are) from the first word *Ecah* — *How*; but the Jewish commentators call it, as the Greeks do, and we from them, *Kinoth* — *Lamentations*. As we have sacred odes or songs of joy, so have we sacred elegies or songs of lamentation; such variety of methods has Infinite Wisdom taken to work upon us and move our affections, and so soften our hearts and make them susceptible of the impressions of divine truths, as the wax of the seal. We have not only *pip'd unto you*, but have *mourn'd* likewise,  Matthew 11:17.

II. The penman of this book; it was Jeremiah the prophet, who is here Jeremiah the poet, and *vates* signifies both; therefore this book is fitly adjoined to the book of his prophecy, and is as an appendix to it. We had there at large the predictions of the desolations of Judah and Jerusalem, and then the history of them, to show how punctually the predictions were accomplished, for the confirming of our faith: now here we have the expressions of his sorrow upon occasion of them, to show that he was very sincere in the protestations he had often made that he did not desire the woeful day, but that, on the contrary, the prospect of it filled him with bitterness. When he saw these calamities at a distance, he wished that his *head were waters and his eyes fountains of tears*; and, when they came, he

made it to appear that he did not dissemble in that wish, and that he was far from being disaffected to his country, which was the crime his enemies charged him with. Though his country had been very unkind to him, and though the ruin of it was both a proof that he was a true prophet and a punishment of them for prosecuting him as a false prophet, which might have tempted him to rejoice in it, yet he sadly lamented it, and herein showed a better temper than that which Jonah was of with respect to Nineveh.

III. The occasion of these Lamentations was the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Chaldean army and the dissolution of the Jewish state both civil and ecclesiastical thereby. Some of the rabbies will have these to be the Lamentations which Jeremiah penned upon occasion of the death of Josiah, which are mentioned ^{<485>}2 Chronicles 35:25. But, though it is true that that opened the door to all the following calamities, yet these Lamentations seem to be penned in the sight, not in the foresight, of those calamities — when they had already come, not when they were at a distance; and these is nothing of Josiah in them, and his praise, as was no question, in the lamentations for him. No, it is Jerusalem's funeral that this is an elegy upon. Others of them will have these Lamentations to be contained in the roll which Baruch wrote from Jeremiah's mouth, and which Jehoiakim burnt, and they suggest that at first there were in it only the 1st, 2nd, and 4th chapters, but that the 3rd and 5th were the *many like words* that were afterwards added; but this is a groundless fancy; that roll is expressly said to be a repetition and summary of the prophet's sermons, ^{<486>}Jeremiah 36:2.

IV. The composition of it; it is not only poetical, but alphabetical, all except the 5th chapter, as some of David's psalms are; each verse begins with a several letter in the order of the Hebrew alphabet, the first *aleph*, the second *beth*, etc., but the 3rd chapter is a triple alphabet, the first three beginning with *aleph*, the next three with *beth*, etc., which was a help to memory (it being designed that these mournful ditties should be got by heart) and was an elegance in writing then valued and therefore not now to be despised. They observe that in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th chapters, the letter *pe* is put before *ain*, which in all the Hebrew alphabets follows it, for a reason of which Dr. Lightfoot offers this conjecture, That the letter *ajin*, which is the numeral letter for Septuagint, was thus, by being displaced,

made remarkable, to put them in mind of the seventy years at the end of which God would turn again their captivity.

V. The use of it: of great use, no doubt, it was to the pious Jews in their sufferings, furnishing them with spiritual language to express their natural grief by, helping to preserve the lively remembrance of Zion among them, and their children that never saw it, when they were in Babylon, directing their tears into the right channel (for they are here taught to mourn for sin and mourn to God), and withal encouraging their hopes that God would yet return and have mercy upon them; and it is of use to us, to affect us with godly sorrow for the calamities of the church of God, as becomes those that are living members of it and are resolved to take our lot with it.