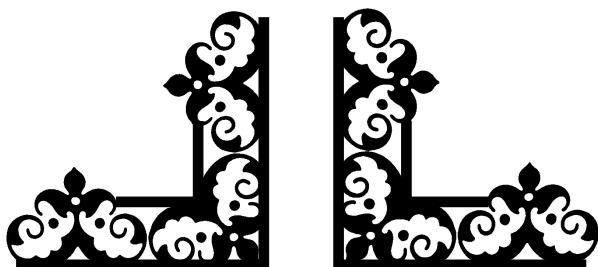


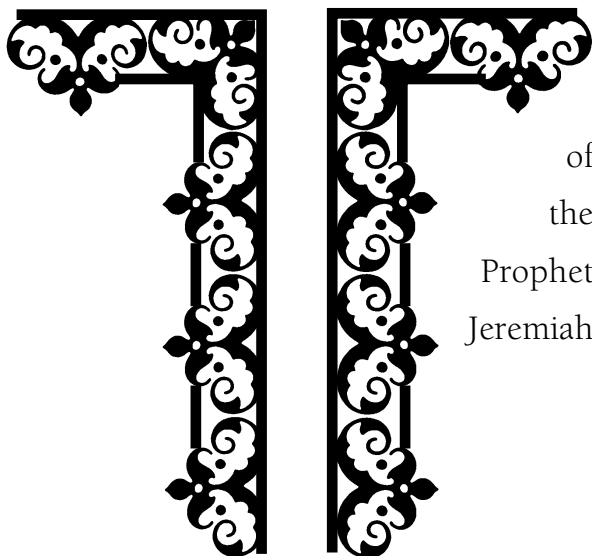
The Peter Martyr Library
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Peter Martyr Vermigli


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Commentary on the Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah

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INTRODUCTION

 It should hardly seem strange that these Lamentations of Jeremiah, which in Greek are said to be *Threnoi*, are among the Hebrews called איכה [ēkhah].¹ As is the case with most books of sacred Scripture, Lamentations is allotted its name from the word or phrase with which it begins. Thus Genesis is called בראשית [b^ērēshīt]; Exodus, ואלה שמות [v^ēlleh sh^ēmōt]; Leviticus, ויקרא [vayyiqrā]; and in a similar way the rest receive names from their first words.²

The order in which we ought to place Lamentations among the books of Holy Scripture is not apparent unless we have first divided them into the groups commonly known as Torah, Earlier Prophets, Later Prophets, and Writings. The Hebrew for “Writings” is כתובים [k^ətūvīm]; but the Greeks call these books Hagiographa. The Torah encompasses the books of sacred Law. The Earlier Prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and

¹*Threnoi* = dirges. The term “Hebrews,” by time-honored Christian tradition, usually had a positive or philological connotation, while “Jews” had a negative; this convention dated back at least to the time of Origen: see N. R. M. Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 30. איכה (ēkhah) = “How,” the first word of Lamentations.

²בראשית = “in the beginning.” ואלה שמות = “and these are the names”—in Jewish literature usually abbreviated ויקרא: שמות = “and [God] called.” (In Stucki’s printed text, Leviticus is misspelled Levicus.) Jewish custom named the Pentateuch and the books of Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Minor Prophets, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Nehemiah, Chronicles from a word in their first verses; only Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Ezekiel, Psalms, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, and Ezra have names which are not derived from their initial verse.

Melakhim. The Later Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, [2] and the Twelve.³ The Writings comprise eleven books: Paralipomenon, *Tehilim*, *Misle*, Job, Ruth, *Koheleth*, *Eccha*, *Sirhasirim*, Esther, Daniel, and Ezra.⁴ These latter books are so named because they concern holy things, yet their form of discourse is poetry.⁵ The power of the Holy Spirit so stoops down and is so devoted to helping us that the Spirit's power uses any sort of human instrument (provided, of course, the instrument is honorable) to soften hard hearts. Just as the Holy Spirit does not disdain metaphors, nonliteral expressions, comparisons, similes, and figures of speech, so also the Spirit employs various kinds of poetry to soothe his human subjects' fierce temperaments. And so also here in a mournful lament, Jeremiah deplores the fall of Jerusalem. (Greeks call dirges *Epicedia*,⁶ and we could use this name for these particular verses.)

In addition to this, you may notice a certain poetic device such

³*Hagiographa* is the Latin form of the Greek "holy writings." Martyr explains that the Jewish way of ordering and grouping the books of the Hebrew Bible. Thus Lamentations is not among the Prophets after Jeremiah, but in the Writings. While not verbatim, Martyr's discussion of the Jewish canon is very similar to Sebastian Münster's *Hebraica Biblia Latina*, "Praefatio," sig. *5v-*6r (reprinted in the 1539 Froschauer edition of Münster's translation of the O.T., as the preface, "De Canonis Libris"): "And they view these twenty-four books in four orders, viz., in תורה (Law), נביאים ראשונים (Earlier Prophets), נביאים אחרונים (Later Prophets), and כתובים (Writings or Hagiographa, because they were produced as if about holy matters by holy men)." In Hebrew *Melakhim* is Kings. "The Twelve" = the Twelve Minor Prophets.

⁴In Latin Bibles, Paralipomenon is the name for Chronicles (Paralipomenon is from the Greek Old Testament and means "things left out [of 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings]." In Hebrew Bibles *Tehilim* is the Hebrew name for Psalms; *Mishley* for Proverbs; *Qohelet* for Ecclesiastes; *Ekhah* for Lamentations; *Shir ha-Shirim* for Song of Solomon. "Ezra" = Ezra and Nehemiah.

⁵"Poetry": *carmen*, i.e. sung poetry. Calling the Hagiographa "poetry" is inexact; as Martyr has just explained, in the Hebrew canon the Writings include Chronicles, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, and Ezra-Nehemiah, which are not so poetic. Among the Writings only Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Song of Solomon are poetry.

⁶Zwingli *In Threnos Ieremiae* (CR 101:667) makes much the same point in his introduction to his notes on Lamentations: OF OLD THEY WERE CALLED "LAMENTS" [*THRENI*], I.E. A DIRGE [*PLANCTUS*], BECAUSE LIKE AN *EPICEDIM* OR MONODY THEY WERE SUNG ABOUT THE SAD FALL OF THE JEWS AND THE CITY JERUSALEM. MOREOVER THEY WERE COMPOSED ACCORDING TO THE NUMBER AND ORDER OF THE LETTERS OF THE HEBREW ALPHABET. IN WHICH MATTER I HAVE NO INTENTION OF LINGERING OVER ALLEGORIES AND THE MYSTICAL SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS. Otherwise, Zwingli's concerns are quite other than Martyr's: e.g., the role of Baruch (he is mentioned in the LXX heading) and the unreliability of the Hebrew vowel points. Note that calling Lamentations a "dirge" is, strictly speaking, inaccurate, since Lamentations is a corporate lament over a city, not a lament over the death of a loved one: see Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 1–23.

that the first Hebrew letter of each and every verse follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet.⁷ While some people admire its elegance, I for my part would rather think that it was done either for the purpose of memorization or because a custom had evolved to compose public hymns along this principle. This we see in the Psalter: Psalm 119 ("Blest are those blameless in their way").⁸ In the Proverbs of Solomon you may find the same thing: "who may find a strong woman."⁹ Circular poems are also not left out of the Psalter.¹⁰ Steps had been taken to ensure that if that people wished to ease their minds, it would not be accomplished by lascivious rhythms, profane tunes, and bawdy compositions, but by those poems that make for true religion.¹¹

It is the prophet's plan, by means of these lamentations of his, to solicit compassion both from the person of God and from his hearers. No one, however, can arouse compassion, except by showing that someone outstanding suffers unworthily.¹² There is no need to speak of the worth of this people, since they were so overloaded with God's gifts that their nobility is abundantly proclaimed in the sacred Scriptures. But uncertainty arises as to how to show they suffered unworthily. One can relieve this doubt as follows. Even though they got what they deserved in God's justice, -6] nevertheless, if you bear in mind the cause of their misfortunes (namely, their sins), such a great people would seem unworthy to be overwhelmed by these crimes. So the prophet implores God in his compassion to make atonement for the

⁷Each chapter, save the last, is an alphabetical acrostic—except that in chapters 2, 3, and 4 the letters ayin (א) and pe (פ) are reversed.

⁸Martyr usually cites Psalms either by chapter or by first line (in the Vulgate); here he does both. Psalm 119 is the longest alphabetical acrostic in the Bible. Martyr uses Psalm 118 because he uses the Vulgate numbering.

⁹Prov. 31:10–31.

¹⁰"Circular poems ... also": *circularia quoque carmina*. Although it is possible that Martyr is calling alphabetical acrostics "circular poems" (thus reference to "circular poems" is rhetorically an *inclusio*, signaling the end to his short discussion of the phenomenon), more probably he is introducing a new category of Psalm, "cyclic" or epic poems, i.e., recitations of salvation history in such Psalms as 78 (as Martyr says in the introduction to his Judges commentary, *In Librum Iudicum* (Zurich, 1561), 2v; ET [3v]: "I am omitting [reference to] David who embellished here and there with sacred histories Psalms which he sang.")

¹¹For Martyr's more complete teaching on the subject see LC, 3.13.25 ff., a scholium from his 1561 Judges commentary.

¹²Martyr's Aristotelianism here comes to the fore; Martyr is thinking of Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero; see Aristotle *Poetics* 13. But how could Israel suffer "unworthily," since the suffering was a punishment for sin? Martyr suggests two ways.

people in whom he took so much delight and to forgive the sins by which they were unworthily bound. In addition, the seriousness of a crime is made clear by the extent and harshness of its punishment. This being the case, compare this people with other nations who were entirely idolaters and who were not invoking, recognizing, or even acknowledging God's name. It would seem that they, compared to other nations, suffered undeservedly. And so, by these means, the prophet incites God to compassion.¹³

Similarly, the Prophet tries to wring compassion out of the people listening to him so that they might feel sorry even for themselves. They feel that at one time they were richly blest; but now they see themselves tossed away and oppressed. So the prophet tries to get them to say good-bye to their crimes and return to the Lord.

Terror is also incited in other peoples when they see where sins have led that people so favored by God. (They may have no fear that such favor is for them!) They sense themselves ensnared by crimes equally bad or even worse. Paul too used this sort of argument in Romans: "If he did not spare the natural branches, he is certainly not going to spare you."¹⁴ As did Peter: "If he did not spare angels who sin," nor hold in check the waters of the flood from Noah's contemporaries, and if he consumed the Five Cities by fire, then, by these examples, God (says the apostle) gave an indication of what would happen to those who were pursuing a dissolute life.¹⁵ These warnings are also very pertinent to our times, when we hear everywhere reports of so many disasters in the Christian world. The face of the church is always the same right from the start. If you call to mind the sacred Scriptures, you will find Adam, the first man, to have been very harshly treated. God threw him out of Paradise on account of the crime he committed.

So much for the book's title, style, order of verses, and purpose for which the prophet wrote it. It remains for me to explain to you exactly how I have decided to go about the interpretation of this book. I shall do this briefly. Principally I shall take care to make plain in as open a manner as possible the meaning of the prophet's words.¹⁶ However,

¹³In Lam. 4:6 there is a complaint to God that Israel's punishment is disproportionately harsh—even worse than Sodom's.

¹⁴Rom. 11:21.

¹⁵2 Pet. 2:4a and paraphrase of vv. 5–9. The "five cities" are Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar (Gen. 14:2); Zoar was said to have been spared (Gen. 19:20ff.).

¹⁶Martyr's *interpretatio* consists principally of making *plana* the *sententia* of the prophet's *verba*.

other [4] supplementary matters, what things people are able to derive or discover on their own, I shall leave to you to be searched out on your own.¹⁷ For as Ibn Ezra rightly observed, to understand the verbal sense in these divine matters is something solid, like the body.¹⁸ When someone appropriates the body for himself, he will easily be able to put over it a variety of clothes. These clothes are, as a consequence, of a greater or lesser value, finer or ruder, in proportion to the inspiration of the divine Spirit, who leads those engaged in "turning these matters over and over by the hand night and day."¹⁹ Imitate this method to grasp the sense of each and every verse. Afterwards it will, believe me, be very easy for you to "put on" new things that are apt for both time and place.²⁰

Do not let what many people thrust at you so unfittingly lead you astray from my good advice. They say, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life."²¹ Everything offered to us without the Spirit of Christ kills, whether it be from human wisdom, from natural law, or from Moses' Decalogue. Even the gospel, if you read it without having the Spirit of Christ, is the letter and it kills. These external things merely instruct, condemn, accuse, and show us what sin is.²² If, on the contrary, you have the Spirit of Christ and handle these things, they do not kill but console. Those people pass time on a faulty work in the name of the letter that kills. So my interpretation of Lamentations will be the kind

¹⁷This idea, even if not the very words, is from the preface of Bucer's Psalms commentary: I HAVE RESTRAINED MYSELF FROM ANAGOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS, BECAUSE IF DONE HEEDLESSLY, SUCH INTERPRETATIONS ARE NOT PRESENTED WITHOUT THE DANGER OF LOOSENING THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES. THEN AGAIN I RESTRAINED MYSELF BECAUSE, ONCE THE HISTORICAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN LEARNED, ANYONE, WHEN THE SPIRIT RAISES HIM UP, MAY EASILY FORM THEM FOR HIMSELF. Bucer, *S. Psalmorum*, "Praefatio," fol. 7b.

¹⁸"To understand the verbal sense": *verborum sensum cognoscere*. See Ibn Ezra's poem which introduces his Lamentations commentary: WHEREFORE WILL THE VERSES' MEANINGS BE LIKENED TO BODIES: THE MIDRASHIM ARE AS GARMENTS CLINGING TO THE BODY: SOME FINE AS SILK AND SOME AS COARSE AS SACK CLOTH. PESHAT'S WAY IS THE BODY. LATER IBN EZRA WOULD EXPAND ON THIS THEORY OF INTERPRETATION AND SAY: KNOW THAT THE WORDS ARE LIKE THE BODIES, THE MEANINGS LIKE THE SOULS, AND THE BODY IS TO THE SOUL LIKE AN INSTRUMENT. See his commentary on Exod. 20:1, etc., as cited in Friedlaender, *Essays on Ibn Ezra*, 4:125 n. 1.

¹⁹Horace *Ars* 268–269. Martyr's humanistic impulse of *ad fontes* is evident not just in his frequent citation of Scripture but also in his citation of extrabiblical sources. Martyr scholars have demonstrated that he goes back to primary sources without using convenient florilegia: Anderson, "Peter ... humanist," 70–71.

²⁰This paragraph is Martyr's manifesto of the primacy of the literal meaning of the Scriptures; later in his career, Martyr would express himself in a more typically Protestant fashion and speak of "the true and natural sense of Scripture," *verum genuinumque sensum Scripturae*: see LC, 1.6.5 (from the preface to his Corinthians commentary).

²¹2 Cor. 3:6.

²²E.g., Gal. 3:24.

that makes absolutely plain the words of the prophet. This is the way in which I carried on my exposition of the Minor Prophets.²³

People still²⁴ argue as to when Jeremiah wrote this mournful poem. Not a few put forward the opinion that this happened when the king of Egypt killed Josiah at Megiddo, since in 2 Chronicles 35 all the men and women singers are said to have performed laments, and among them Jeremiah is mentioned by name.²⁵ St. Jerome cites this opinion and does not refute it.²⁶ In the course of my interpretation I shall, however, see if there is contained in this book anything that pertains to the killing of Josiah.

Others say that this book is the one about which chapter 36 of Jeremiah is written. King Jehoiakim [5] tore it in pieces and threw it into the fire. This fire had been put before the king in his winter house, where he was at that time residing. If they had not hid by the power of God, Jehoiakim would also have given the order to kill Jeremiah and his ever faithful scribe Baruch. God, however, did not allow what he had said to his prophet to perish. He ordered Jeremiah a second time to record not only the prophecies just destroyed but many similar prophecies as well. As it says there, “many others, like those.” Rashi, who defends this opinion, interprets this passage in the following way. In the book which the king cut up and commanded to be consumed by fire, there were but three alphabetical chapters: “How lonely she sits,” and “How God has darkened,” and finally “How darkened is the gold.”²⁷ Not only did

²³Simler said that Martyr began his expositions with Lamentations—but plainly it was with the Minor Prophets. Martyr’s work on the Minor Prophets was extant when Stucki edited Lamentations (see Stucki’s “Greeting to the Good Reader,” sig. **2).

²⁴Still = *adhac*, i.e., *adhuc*.

²⁵2 Chron. 35:25. Text reads: “ch. 35 of Chronicles.” Rashi cites this Jewish tradition with reference to Lam. 4:1 ff. (“How darkened is the gold”): THIS LAMENT WAS SAID ABOUT JOSIAH, AS WAS SAID IN CHRONICLES [2 Chron. 35:25], IS IT NOT WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS?

²⁶Jerome *Questiones Hebraicae in Libros Regum et Paralipomenon*, PL 23:1401.

²⁷(“Rashi,” *lit.* “Rabbi Solomon.”) Rashi: JEREMIAH WROTE A BOOK OF LAMENTS. THIS WAS THE SCROLL, WHICH JEHOIAKIM BURNED UPON THE BRAZIER, WHICH WAS ON THE FIRE, AND THERE WERE ON IT THREE ALPHABETS: HOW SHE SAT, HOW HE BECLOUDED, HOW WAS BECLOUDED [Lam. 1:1, 2:1, 4:1]. AGAIN HE ADDED TO IT I AM THE MAN, WHICH IS THREE ALPHABETS; AS IT WAS SAID, AND AGAIN WAS ADDED TO THEM MANY WORDS LIKE THOSE [Jer. 36:32]; THREE FOR THREE. That is, in the book of Jeremiah, chap. 36, it is said that King Jehoiakim burned a book of prophecy that Jeremiah spoke. The book was really chapters 1, 2, and 4 of Lamentations, which are composed of three alphabetical acrostics. When it says in Jer. 36:32 that Jeremiah dictated again the prophecy “and added to them many words like those,” it means that Jeremiah gave again chaps. 1, 2, and 4 of Lamentations and added to them chap. 3, which is a triple alphabetical acrostic. In that sense chap. 3

Jeremiah restore all of these three alphabetical chapters, but also he added a fourth. In it there were three verses for each letter. In this way the added chapter might be equal in number of alphabetical verses to those three chapters that he had previously composed by the same method. This is why the Hebrew phrase כְּהֵמָה [k^ehemah] occurs near the last part of chapter 36, as if to say, "Three added to three."

Rabbi Ibn Ezra²⁸ does not go along with Rashi's opinion for two reasons. First, in this book of Lamentations "the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah for a second time" ought to be written, which is something you do not see there. Second, in the account of the book that the king burned, it says that the king was angry with Jeremiah. For Jeremiah had said that the king of Babylon would come and that he would decree such and such against the nation and the holy place, which were warnings of the cruelty to come. Yet in Lamentations there is no mention of the king of Babylon. With these words the rabbi rebuts the opinion related above. Though he is in other respects very sharp, his arguments are of no great moment and may easily be refuted.

Finally, there have been others who were of the opinion that this poem was composed not before the fall of the city and its kingdom but afterwards, as a monument of such a great disaster.²⁹ However that may

is equal to chaps. 1, 2, and 4. Hence it is "like those." (Rashi is alluding to a midrashic interpretation: see *Lam. Rab.* 3.1, ET, 188.)

²⁸Ibn Ezra: AND IT IS NOT THE SCROLL BURNED UP BY JEHOIAKIM, SINCE WE DID NOT FIND TWO "WORDS OF GOD" WHICH ARE INSCRIBED IN THE BOOK, FOR THUS IT IS WRITTEN: TAKE FOR YOURSELF A SCROLL AND YOU SHALL WRITE ON IT ALL THE WORDS WHICH I SPOKE TO YOU CONCERNING ISRAEL AND JUDAH AND ALL THE NATIONS [Jer. 36:2]; AND IT IS FURTHER WRITTEN: WHY DID YOU WRITE UPON IT, SAYING, "THE KING OF BABYLON WILL SURELY COME AND DESTROY THIS LAND"? [Jer. 36:29]; BUT THERE IS IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS NO RECALLING OF EITHER BABYLON OR HER KING. That is, the book of Lamentations is not the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies mentioned in Jer. 36. We know this because the contents of this scroll are summarized in Jer. 36:29 and do not correspond to what is in the book of Lamentations. For example, Jeremiah prophesied "that the king of Babylon will surely come and destroy this land," but no such thing is found in Lamentations.

²⁹E.g., Zwingli, *In Threnos Ieremiae*: THEY WERE SUNG ABOUT THE LAMENTABLE FALL OF THE JEWS AND THE CITY OF JERUSALEM (CR 101:667). Pellican: SO THESE LAMENTATIONS COULD BE EXPOUNDED IN TWO WAYS: LITERALLY, I.E., CONCERNING THE CITY OF JERUSALEM AND TEMPLE'S OVERTHROW, ACCOMPLISHED PRINCIPALLY THROUGH THE CHALDEANS IN THE TIME OF JEREMIAH. HE LAMENTED THE RUIN, WHICH WAS SEEN DURING HIS OWN TIME, OF BOTH HIS CITY AND HIS PEOPLE (*Commentaria in Lamentationes*, sig. bbb). Although Martyr does not outrightly adopt this (quite correct) option and does not directly refute the authoritative

be, the little book is not to be despised. Nor does it diminish a whit the profits and benefits that, as I stated a little previously, were to be found in it.³⁰ Without further ado, let me begin.

interpretation of Jerome, he nevertheless expounds Lamentations as if it were a lament for a fallen city.

³⁰“As I stated a little previously”: a short time earlier Martyr had stated, “These warnings are also very pertinent to our times.” Cf. Oecolampadius, *In Threnos Hieremiae*, sig. Qq: HOWEVER IT MATTERS NOT A WHIT AT WHICH TIME THE PROPHET WROTE, BECAUSE THESE THINGS WERE WRITTEN NOT JUST FOR THE EDIFICATION OF THE JERUSALEMITES BUT ALSO FOR US.