

Lamentations - Introduction & Background

Title

The Hebrew title of the book is derived from its opening word *Ekah* (1:1; 2:1; 4:1), which means "alas" or "how." Because of its encapsulation of the book's contents, the Hebrews also employed the title *Ginoth*, which means "Elegies" or "Lamentations." The LXX entitled the book *Threnoi*, which means "dirges" or "laments." The Latin Vulgate entitles the book *Threni*, which means "tears" or "lamentations." The Vulgate title is derived from the LXX title. The subtitle of the Vulgate says, "Id est lamentations Jeremiae prophetae," which means "This is the Lamentations of Jeremiah the prophet." This subtitle became the basis for the English title "Lamentations" (JB, NIV) or "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" (KJV, ASV, RSV).

Authorship

Although the Book of Lamentations is an anonymous work, several lines of evidence point to Jeremiah as the book's writer. Externally, early Jewish and Christian tradition unanimously favors Jeremiah as the book's author. "Jeremiah's authorship of Lamentations was universally accepted till 1712 when Herman von der Hardt wrote a commentary which challenged this position. The objections raised by von der Hardt and others against Jeremiah's authorship have been answered."

Not only does the LXX entitle the book "The Lamentations of Jeremiah," but a superscription found in both the LXX and the Vulgate reads, "And it came to pass after Israel had been taken away into captivity and Jerusalem had been laid waste that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem and said." Other external sources attributing authorship of the book to Jeremiah include the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a), the Jewish Talmud, the Aramaic Targum of Jonathan, the Peshitta, and Josephus (*Ant.* 10.5.1). Early church fathers Origen and Jerome also indicated that Jeremiah wrote the Book of Lamentations. Jeremiah is also a likely candidate for authorship of the book given his familiarity with the lament genre (2 Chr 35:25). The book's "present location after the book of Jeremiah in the English text reflects this judgment."

Internally, Jeremiah is a likely candidate for authorship of the book given the fact that he was an eyewitness to Jerusalem's fall (Jer 39; 52). The vivid details regarding the fall of Jerusalem as recorded in the Book of Lamentations (1:13-15; 2:6,9; 4:1-12) demand that an eyewitness to this event composed the book. Moreover, common expressions and phrases are found upon comparing the Book of Lamentations (1:2,15,16a; 2:11,22; 4:21) to the Book

of Jeremiah (30:14; 8:21; 9:1,18b; 6:25; 4:21).⁹ For example, “the phrase ‘daughter of’ occurs about 20x in each book.” Furthermore, both books depict the horrors that fell upon Jerusalem due to the Babylonian incursions (Jer 19:9; Lam 2:20; 4:10). Also, the same grief over Jerusalem’s fall that is expressed in both books indicates that they were both written by the same “weeping prophet.”

Date and Occasion for Writing

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem from January of 588 BC to July of 586 BC. Jerusalem fell on 7/19/586 BC and the city and its temple were burned on 8/15/586 BC. Although Jeremiah wrote after Jerusalem’s fall (1:11), he likely composed his work before his rebellious fellow Jews took him against his will to Egypt in 583–582 BC (Jer 43:1–7). Furthermore, “the vivid descriptions and deep emotions expressed in the Book of Lamentations argue for composition shortly after the events occurred possibly in late 586 BC or early 585 BC.” Thus, the historical occasion for the writing of the Book of Lamentations was the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BC and the inauguration of the resulting seventy-year exile (Jer 25:11; 29:10). Therefore, the historical background of the Book of Lamentations is identical to the historical background for the Book of Jeremiah.

Recipients and Place of Writing

The Book of Lamentations was addressed to the exiles that were eyewitnesses to the destruction of the City of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple in 586 BC. However, the breadth of this audience should be taken into account. “Jeremiah directed this message to the people of Judah still alive after the destruction of Jerusalem. This would have included those taken into captivity to Babylon, those who remained in the land of Judah, and those who fled to Egypt. All these individuals were experiencing the Lord’s ongoing judgment because of their sin. They needed to read—and heed—the lessons found in this book.” Also, the book’s consistent references to the horrific condition of Jerusalem point to the ruins of this city as the probable locale for the book’s composition.

Structure

Several structural clues must be observed before the message of Lamentations can be fully appreciated. First, the book consists of five funeral dirges over the fall of Jerusalem and each chapter of the book contains a different dirge. These dirges consist of Jerusalem’s desolation due to her sins (1:1–22), Jehovah’s divine destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (2:1–22), Jeremiah’s distressed response (3:1–66), Jerusalem’s destruction (4:1–22), and the Jerusalem remnant’s declaration to God (5:1–22). Second, these dirges are chiasmatically structured. “The Book of Lamentations has a definite structural balance. Chapters 1–2 and 4–5 parallel each other and are arranged in a chiasm pattern. Thus Lam 1 and 5 focus on the people while Lam 2 and 4 focus on the Lord. Lam 3 provides the pivot for the book, pointing to Jeremiah’s response in the midst of affliction.”

Third, each of the book's funeral dirges closes with a prayer for the restoration of divine favor. However, chapter four deviates from this pattern probably because the entirety of the subsequent chapter (5) represents a prayer to God. Fourth, the book's first four chapters employ the use of an acrostic. This literary device can be defined as the formation of a word, group of words, or alphabet when the first letter in each line, sentence, or paragraph is taken in order.¹⁸ In chapters 1–2 and 4, each of the 22 verses in the chapter begins with the successive 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Because chapter three contains 66 verses, three verses each are allotted to each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. While chapter 5 contains 22 verses, it is not an acrostic.

Regarding the sixteenth and seventeenth letters of the Hebrew alphabet, while chapter one and Psalm 119 follow an *ayin–pē* order, Lam 2–4 follow a *pē–ayin* order. However, archeological discoveries have confirmed that both orderings are acceptable ways of recording the Hebrew alphabet. Jeremiah likely employed acrostics in his book in order to not only convey the full range (A to Z) of emotion associated with the fall of Jerusalem, but he also used this device to aid easy memorization. Apparently, he did not want the book's lesson to be easily forgotten and he may have composed the book so that it could be used in Hebrew liturgy.

Fifth, the book's final chapter (5) is a "mold breaker" in the sense that it does not follow literary patterns developed in the previous four chapters. For example, while the book's first four chapters follow an acrostic pattern, chapter 5 does not. Moreover, while the first four chapters use "limping meter," chapter 5 does not. In addition, while Lam 1, 2, and 4 each begins with the Hebrew word *Ekaḥ*, Lam 5 does not. Lam 5 probably does not follow these earlier patterns since it represents the remnant's repentant response. The final chapter's literary distinction helps convey the appropriate response that the divine chastisement, as described in the book's first four chapters, was intended to produce. Sixth, the first two chapters contain three lines per verse. Lam 4 contains two lines per verse. Chapters three and five contain one line per verse. Seventh, the theme of renewal permeates the book. This theme can be traced as follows: sin leading to suffering (1:1-8), sorrow that is caused by suffering leading to repentance (1:9-20), prayer that is caused by repentance leading to hope (1:21–3:24), faith that is caused by hope leading to restoration (3:25–5:21).

Message

Jeremiah expresses his deep remorse over Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BC as well as his hope regarding the nation's restoration so that the remnant will cease from covenant sin that brought about this disaster and have hope regarding God's covenant purpose of restoring Israel's fortunes.

Purposes

Jeremiah likely had several purposes in mind when he penned the Book of Lamentations. First, Jeremiah wrote the book in order to validate how his earlier prophecies regarding Jerusalem's destruction had come to pass. Second, he wrote in order to show how the covenant curses of Deut 28 and Lev 26 had become a reality for the Jewish nation in 586 BC. Third, Jeremiah wrote to explain that God still intended to keep His promises of restoration to His covenanted nation despite the present tragedy (3:19-39). Fourth, Jeremiah wrote in order to invoke repentance on the part of the remnant. Fifth, Jeremiah wrote in order to invoke hope for the future on the part of the remnant. Sixth, Jeremiah wrote in order to give full written expression to the grief the nation felt as a result of the events surrounding 586 BC. Thus, while the Book of Jeremiah to a large extent warns of the coming 586 BC judgment, the Book of Lamentations reflects upon this event. Seventh, the book was written in order to create the literary expression that would eventually be read during the fast on the ninth day of the fifth month, which is Ab or mid July, in order to commemorate the destruction of the temples in 586 BC and 70 AD and Bar Kochba's revolt (135 AD). Consequently, the Jews categorized the Book of Lamentations as part of the *Megilloth* or "five rolls" that were used for liturgical purposes to commemorate various Jewish special days. The other festival books include Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.

Theological Themes

Several theological themes recur throughout the Book of Lamentations. First, the book reiterates God's sovereignty as the one who unilaterally brought to pass Jerusalem's destruction (2:17; 3:37-38). Second, the book focuses upon God's faithfulness not only in imposing immediate covenant discipline but also in promising ultimate covenant restoration (3:19-40; 5:19-22). Third, the book appropriately mourns the horrors of the 586 BC holocaust. Fourth, the book highlights "confession of sin and acknowledgement of God's righteous and holy judgment upon Judah."

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Lamentations boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book is probably the most tragic in all of the Old Testament. Second, the book makes extensive use of the acrostic. Third, the book employs numerous contrasts, comparisons, and figures of speech. Fourth, the book is the only one in the entire canon that represents a funeral dirge for the city of Jerusalem.

Fifth, the book is known for its lament pattern (2 Sam 1:17-27). Thus, the Hebrew word *Ekah* ("how" or "alas") introduces three of the book's dirges (1:1; 2:1; 4:1). Moreover, the book makes use of *qinah* or "limping meter" in its first four chapters. "In this rhythmic pattern the second half of a line of verse has one less beat than the first half of a line. This forms a 3+2 'limping meter' which conveys a hollow, incomplete feeling to the reader."

Christ in Lamentations

The book contains no direct messianic prophecies. However, Jeremiah typifies Christ in several ways. First, his role as the "weeping prophet" typifies Christ who will perform the same function (Matt 23:37-38). Second, just as Jeremiah identified with the sinful Jerusalemites, Christ similarly identified with the plight humanity. Third, Jeremiah foreshadows Christ in the way he was despised, afflicted (1:12; 3:19), and mocked (2:15-16; 3:14,30).

Outline

I. Jerusalem's desolation resulting from her sin (Lam 1:1-22)

- (1) Jeremiah laments Jerusalem's desolation (1:1-11)
 - (A) Population decreased (1:1a)
 - (B) Prominence among the nations decreased (1:1b)
 - (C) Former allies have turned upon her (1:2-3)
 - (D) Feasts no longer followed (1:4)
 - (E) Enemies rule over her (1:5-7)
 - (F) Dishonor (1:8-9)
 - (G) Temple desecrated (1:10)
 - (H) Starvation (1:11)
- (2) Jerusalem's personified response (1:12-22)
 - (A) Jerusalem's plea for mercy (1:12-19)
 - (B) Jerusalem's concluding prayer to God (1:20-22)

II. God's punishment of Jerusalem resulting from her sin (Lam 2:1-22)

- (1) God's wrath against Jerusalem (2:1-10)
 - (A) Her strongholds (2:1-5)
 - (B) Her temple (2:6-7)
 - (C) Her walls (2:8-9a)
 - (D) Her leaders (2:9b-10a)
 - (E) Her virgins (2:10b)
- (2) Re-visitation of Jerusalem's desolation (2:11-19)
 - (A) Infant hunger (2:11-12)
 - (B) False prophets (2:13-14)
 - (C) Enemies mocking (2:15-17)
 - (D) People wailing (2:18-19)
- (3) Jeremiah's concluding plea to God (2:20-22)

III. Jeremiah's response (Lam 3:1-66)

- (1) Jeremiah's grief (3:1-18)
 - (A) Afflicted (3:1-3)
 - (B) Besieged (3:4-6)
 - (C) Trapped (3:7-9)

- (D) Persecuted (3:10-12)
 - (E) Mocked (3:13-15)
 - (F) Rejected (3:16-18)
 - (2) Jeremiah's hope in God (3:19-39)
 - (A) His permanent mercy (3:19-24)
 - (B) His promised deliverance (3:25-32)
 - (C) His perfect justice (3:33-39)
 - (3) Jeremiah's prayer (3:40-66)
 - (A) Invitation to repent (3:40-42)
 - (B) Consequences of sin (3:43-54)
 - (C) Desire for divine vengeance against adversaries (3:55-66)
- IV. God's anger resulting in Jerusalem's destruction (Lam 4:1-22)
- (1) Contrast before and after 586 BC (4:1-11)
 - (A) First round (4:1-6)
 - (a) Introduction (4:1)
 - (b) Jerusalem's precious sons became mere earthen jars (4:2)
 - (c) Mothers ceased meeting the physical needs of their children (4:3-4)
 - (d) Wealthy became poor (4:5)
 - (e) Reason: sin (4:6)
 - (B) Second round (4:7-11)
 - (a) Elites physically deteriorated (4:7-9)
 - (b) Mothers have eaten their children (4:10)
 - (c) Reason: God's anger (4:11)
 - (2) Siege described (4:12-20)
 - (A) Jerusalem's prior perceived invulnerability (4:12)
 - (B) Lack of aid to those scattered (4:13-16)
 - (C) No one could help Jerusalem (4:17)
 - (D) No one would escape Jerusalem's attackers (4:18-20)
 - (3) Future hope: God will vindicate Zion and judge her oppressors (4:21-22)
- V. Remnant's response (Lam 5:1-22)
- (1) Remnant's prayer for God to remember them (5:1-18)
 - (A) Their reproach (5:1)
 - (B) Their stolen property (5:2)
 - (C) Their vulnerability (5:3)
 - (D) Their costly necessities (5:4)
 - (E) Their lack of rest from their pursuers (5:5)
 - (F) Their dependence upon their enemies for food (5:6)
 - (G) Their paying the penalty for the sins of their ancestors (5:7)

- (H) Their being ruled by mere slaves (5:8)
 - (I) Their vulnerability when they sought food (5:9)
 - (J) Their physical adversity (5:10)
 - (K) Their women were abused (5:11)
 - (L) Their leaders were abused (5:12)
 - (M) Their enslaved youth (5:13)
 - (N) Their normalcy removed (5:14)
 - (O) Their cessation of joy (5:15)
 - (P) Their prominence removed (5:16)
 - (Q) Their heavy hearts (5:17)
 - (R) Their desolate city (5:18)
- (2) The remnant's plea for restoration (5:19-22)
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Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is a complete book in itself, a five-chapter book that is sort of an appendix to the book of Jeremiah. The book of Lamentations is his outpouring, where he essentially mourns for Jerusalem. The poor guy on the one hand was faithful in his office as a prophet, he told forth what God had told him to tell forth, and Jerusalem was going to be judged for her iniquity. On the other hand, Jeremiah was a patriot, his roots were there and his emotional commitment to Judah was absolutely uncompromising.

In the Hebrew it is composed almost like a symphony, it has a very unusual linguistic structure. The first 4 chapters are an acrostic: Lam 1,2,4 consist of 22 verses each and there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each verse starts with the next letter. Lam 3 is the fullest confession of sin, the sin of Judah. In this case, the first three verses start with *alph*, the next three verses start with *beth*, it is an acrostic but in groups of three. Ps 119 sort of does this also. Now for some reason, Lam 5 the last chapter of the book also has 22 verses, however it is not in acrostic.

There is frequent use of the *qînâh* meter in chapters 1-4: in this rhythmic pattern, the second half of a line of verse has one less beat than the first half of a line. This forms a 3 + 2 "limping meter," which conveys a hollow, incomplete feeling to the reader.

The whole style of the book is deep poetry of a mournful, sorrowful, lamenting sort of nature.

Recognize that this is deliberately structured to be contrast with Israel. One way to learn about words conceptually is to learn the opposite meaning. Interesting that our High Priest (metaphorically speaking) is described by Paul as taking to Himself the Church not as the adulterous widow, not the divorced widow of Jehovah, our High Priest takes to Himself the virgin bride. Ephesians elsewhere Paul uses that idiom of the Church.

Geopolitical Background

The armies of Babylon burned the temple, the king's palace, and all the other major buildings in the city; they also tore down the walls of the city which provided her protection. When the Babylonians finally finished their destruction and departed with their prisoners, they left a jumbled heap of smoldering rubble. Jeremiah witnessed the desecration of the temple and the destruction of the city (Jer 39:1-14; 52:12-14). The once-proud capital had been trampled in the dust. Her people were now under the harsh hand of a cruel taskmaster. With all these events stamped vividly on his mind, Jeremiah sat down to compose his series of laments.

5 Poems/Hymns

Lam 1: The prophet dwells on the manifold miseries oppressed by which the city sits as a solitary widow weeping sorely.

Lam 2: These miseries are described in connection with the national sins that had caused them.

Lam 3: Speaks of hope for the people of God. The chastisement would only be for their good; a better day would dawn for them.

Lam 4: Laments the ruin and desolation that had come upon the city and temple, but traces it only to the people's sins.

Lam 5: A prayer that Zion's reproach may be taken away in the repentance and recovery of the people.