

Book of Lamentations

Title:

“Lamentations” was derived from a translation of the title as found in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), and conveys the idea of “loud cries.”

The Hebrew exclamation *Ekah* (“How,” which expresses “dismay”), used in 1:1, 2:1, 4:1, gives the book its Hebrew title.

However, the rabbis began early to call the book “loud cries” or “lamentations” (compare Jer. 7:29).

No other entire Old Testament book contains only laments, as does this distressful dirge, marking the funeral of the once beautiful city of Jerusalem (compare 2:15).

This book keeps alive the memory of that for all, and teaches all believers how to deal with suffering.

The Hebrew title of the book, *Ekah*, “How,” comes from the first word of the text.

It was often used to introduce laments, as here (compare Isaiah 1:21), and stands also at the head of chapters 2 and 4.

The Greek title “Tears/Wailings,” is the same in the Latin Vulgate which adds a subtitle “That is, The Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah.”

From this explanation comes the title in the English versions.

Authorship:

The author of Lamentations is not named within the book, but there are internal and historical indications that it was Jeremiah.

The LXX introduces Lam. 1:1, “And it came to pass, after Israel had been carried away captive”, Jeremiah sat weeping (compare 3:48-49, etc.).

God had told Jeremiah to have Judah lament (Jer. 7:29).

And Jeremiah also wrote laments for Josiah (2 Chron. 35:25).

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations as an eyewitness (Compare 1:13-15; 2:6, 9; 4:1-12), possibly with Baruch's secretarial help (compare Jer. 36:4; 45:1), during or soon after Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C.

It was mid-July when the city fell, and mid-August when the temple was burned.

Likely, Jeremiah saw the destruction of walls, towers, homes, palace, and temple; he wrote while the event remained painfully fresh in his memory, but before his forced departure to Egypt (in ca. 583 B.C.; compare Jer. 43:1-7).

The language used in Lamentations closely parallels that used by Jeremiah in his much larger prophetic book (compare 1:2 with Jer. 30:14; 1:15 with Jer. 8:21; 1:6 and 2:11 with Jer. 9:1, 18; 2:22 with Jer. 6:25; 4:21 with Jer. 49:12).

Both Jewish and Christian traditions hold that Jeremiah is the author of Lamentations.

Internal evidence supports this conclusion:

- (1) The author was an eyewitness to Jerusalem's destruction (1:13-15; 2:6-13; 4:10).
- (2) The language, vocabulary, and sentiment of the prophecy of Jeremiah and lamentations are often very close (compare 1:16a; 2:11 with Jeremiah 9:1, 18; 13:17; Lam. 2:20; 4:10 with Jer. 19:9; Lam. 2:22 with Jer. 6:25; 20:10; Lam. 3:15 with Jer. 9:15; 23:15; Lam. 3:64-66 with Jer. 11:20).
- (3) In both books, Jerusalem's downfall is ascribed to Judah's sin (compare 1:5-18; 3:42; 4:6, 22; 5:7, 16 with Jer. 14:7; 16:10-12), and to its corrupt leadership (compare 2:14; 4:13-15 with Jer. 2:7-8; 5:31; 23:11-40).

In the light of the external and internal evidence, then, no other person qualifies so well to be the author as the traditional candidate, Jeremiah.

Historical Setting:

Lamentations was composed after the author personally witnessed Judah's downfall and the capture of Jerusalem, with the resultant suffering of his people.

In its final form, the book cannot be dated much later than Jerusalem's fall (586 B.C.).

The author thus pens his sorrow over the tragedy that befell his country and city, and over the people's sin that invoked God's severe judgment.

In response to all that has happened, he urges repentance (compare 5:21) and leaves his bearers with a note of hope by personally relying on the sure mercies of God (3:22-23).

Jerusalem, indeed the entire land of Israel, was a heartbreaking sight in 586 B.C.

With its glory consumed by fire and defeat, the City of David was now a city of utter devastation.

The 10 northern tribes, Israel, had been decimated by Assyrian armies in 722 B.C.

And Judah's elite (including Daniel and his three Hebrew friends), had recently been deported to Babylon (in 606 B.C.).

This attack on Jerusalem was simply the final blow.

The temple was obliterated, the walls of the city were flattened.

Mount Zion was a pile of rubble, with only wind, wild animals, and weakened survivors left.

Those who remained had two questions: Why, and what now?

The "why" was clear.

God's prophets had warned for years about the consequences of ongoing sin. As for "what now", the Book of Lamentations answers: repentance.

Jeremiah had told the people that the land would be allowed to rest for 70 years (Jer. 25:11), after the devastation.

It would be that long before the captives would return and the city and temple could be rebuilt.

If those left behind did nothing but repent for 70 years, it would be time well spent.

And the five laments compiled in the Book of Lamentations would be their prayer book.

Lamentations is often called the most sorrowful book in the Bible, written by the most sorrowful author, Jeremiah, known as the "weeping prophet" (Jer. 7:29; 8:21; 9:1, 10, 20).

Background:

The prophetic seeds of Jerusalem's destruction were sown by Joshua 800 years in advance (Joshua 23:15-16).

Now, for over 40 years, Jeremiah had prophesied of coming judgment, and had been scorned by the people for preaching doom (ca. 645 – 605 B.C.).

When that judgment came on the disbelieving people from Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army, Jeremiah still responded with great sorrow and compassion toward his suffering and obstinate people.

Lamentations relates closely to the book of Jeremiah, describing the anguish over Jerusalem's receiving God's judgment for unrepentant sins.

In the book that bears his name, Jeremiah had predicted the calamity (in chapters 1-29).

In Lamentations, he concentrates in more detail on the bitter suffering and heartbreak that was felt over Jerusalem's devastation (compare Jer. 46:4-5).

So critical was Jerusalem's destruction, that the facts are recorded in 4 separate Old Testament chapters (2 Kings chapter 25; Jer. 39:1-11; chapter 52 and 2 Chron. 36:11-21).

All 154 verses have been recognized by the Jews as a part of their sacred canon.

Along with Ruth, Esther, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes, Lamentations is included among the Old Testament books of the Megilloth, or "five scrolls," which were read in the synagogue on special occasions.

Lamentations is read on the 9th of Ab (July/August), to remember the date of Jerusalem's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar.

Interestingly, this same date later marked the destruction of Herod's temple by the Romans (in A.D. 70).

Lamentations consists of five poems.

Each of the first four is composed as an acrostic of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet (although it should be noted that chapters 2, 3 and 4 are somewhat irregular since they invert the letters *pe* and *ayin*).

Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 have 22 verses; chapter 3, however, devotes three verses to each letter, yielding 66 verses.

This familiar poetic device indicates that the author is covering his material thoroughly ("from A to Z"), in a way that was easy for his audience to understand and remember.

The Jewish people read Lamentations every year on the date commemorating the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Historical and Theological Themes:

The chief focus of Lamentations is on God's judgment in response to Judah's sin.

This theme can be traced throughout the book (1:5, 8, 18, 20; 3:42; 4:6, 13, 22; 5:16).

A second theme which surfaces, is the hope found in God's compassion (as in 3:22-24; 31-33; compare Psalm 30:3-5).

Though the book deals with disgrace, it turns to God's great faithfulness (3:22-25), and closes with grace as Jeremiah moves from Lamentation to consolation (5:19-22).

God's sovereign judgment represents a third current in the book.

His holiness was so offended by Judah's sin that He ultimately brought the destructive calamity.

Babylon was chosen to be His human instrument for wrath (1:5, 12, 15; 2:1, 17; 3:37-38; compare Jer. 50:23).

Jeremiah mentions Babylon more than 150 times (from Jer. 20:4 to 52:34), but in Lamentations he never once explicitly names Babylon or its king, Nebuchadnezzar.

Only the LORD is identified as the One who dealt with Judah's sin.

Fourth, because the sweeping judgment seemed to be the end of every hope of Israel's salvation and the fulfillment of God's promises (compare 3:18), much of the book appears in the mode of prayer:

- (1) 1:11, which represents a wailing confession of sin (compare verse 18);
- (2) 3:8, with its anguish when God "shuts out my prayer" (compare 3:43-54; Jer. 7:16);
- (3) 3:55-59, where Jeremiah cries to God for relief, or 3:60-66, where he seeks for recompense to the enemies (which Jer. chapters 50 and 51 guarantees); and
- (4) 5:1-22, with its appeal to heaven for restored mercy (which Jer. chapters 30-33 assures), based on the confidence that God is faithful (3:23).

A fifth feature relates to Christ.

Jeremiah's tears (3:48-49), compare with Jesus' weeping over the same city of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-44).

Though God was the judge and executioner, it was a grief to Him to bring this destruction.

The statement "In all their affliction, He [God] was afflicted" (Isa. 63:9), was true in principle.

God will one day wipe away all tears (Isa. 25:8; Rev. 7:17; 21:4), when sin shall be no more.

A sixth theme is an implied warning to all who read this book.

If God did not hesitate to judge His beloved people (Deut. 32:10), what will He do to the nations of the world who reject His Word?