



An Introduction to the Book of Lamentations

Author and Title

In the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations is called *Ekaḥ* meaning ‘How’, after the first word in the book. This word occurs in 1:1, 2:1, and 4:1 to emphasise how much Jerusalem has suffered.

The book does not identify its author, which should keep interpreters from unnecessarily contentious debates. Many scholars consider Jeremiah the author. They base this decision on:

1. The statement in 2 Chronicles 35:25 that Jeremiah ‘uttered a lament for Josiah’.
2. The fact that Jeremiah was an eyewitness of Jerusalem’s destruction.
3. The similarities in theological emphasis and vocabulary between the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations.

In addition, much Jewish tradition, such as the Septuagint, the Targum on Jeremiah, and the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 15a, attributes this book to Jeremiah. The problems with this view include:

1. Lamentations does not name Jeremiah as its author.
2. The book of Jeremiah details much of Jeremiah’s post-587BC activities but says nothing about his writing Lamentations.
3. There are differences in key vocabulary between Jeremiah and Lamentations.
4. Lamentations provides material for worship in Jerusalem, whereas Jeremiah spent his last years in Egypt.

Others think Lamentations was written by several persons over several years. They argue that the intricately detailed poetry must be the product of an extended period of reflection. They consider the theological variety in the poems to be

evidence of multiple authors. The problem with this view is that it does not take fully into account the commonalities between Jeremiah and Lamentations, or the book's eyewitness quality.

Given these considerations, some would argue that it is best to treat Lamentations as the book itself does. That means accepting it as:

1. An anonymous work that agrees with the theology of books like Deuteronomy and Jeremiah.
2. A literary masterpiece.
3. A work that reflects eyewitness testimony.

Although it is possible that Lamentations was penned by more than one poet, as were the Psalms, its unity of theme, movement and poetic form is best accounted for by accepting a one-author hypothesis. If so, Jeremiah remains the favoured choice as its author.

Date

Lamentations describes the results of Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC in vivid, although stylised detail. The book has the flavour of personal experience and eyewitness testimony, particularly in the descriptions of death and starvation in 4:1-22. Although it is possible that a long time passed between the destruction and the book's composition, there is no compelling reason to accept this conclusion. Since temple worship had begun again by 520-516BC, during the time of Haggai and Zechariah, it is likely that the mourning for the city and temple had reached its height before then. The date of the writing of Lamentations probably falls between 587-516BC, with a time earlier in the era being more likely, especially if Jeremiah were its author.

Theme

The key passage in Lamentations is 3:19-24, where the speaker affirms that belief in God's mercy and faithfulness is the key to a restored relationship with God. This fact is true even for people who have merited and received God's judgement (1:18). Hope, not despair, is the final word in Lamentations.

This theme becomes clear as the book unfolds. Lamentations presents five intricately interconnected poems. Together they describe a movement from horrible loss and personal shame, to restored hope and prayer for renewal. This movement has both individual and community components, and is conveyed by the literary type, acrostic forms, meter, and basic movement of Lamentations.

Purpose

Lamentations was most likely written to be prayed or sung in worship services devoted to asking God's forgiveness and seeking restoration to a covenant

relationship with God. Such observances began as early as the months after the temple's destruction in 587BC (Jeremiah 41:4-5). They continued when the temple was rebuilt during Zechariah's time in circa 520BC; refer to Zechariah 7:3-5 and 8:19. As time passed, Lamentations was read and sung as part of annual observances related to remembering the temple's destruction.

Key Themes

Lamentations is a neglected book. This is unfortunate because it presents key theological concepts composed creatively during an important era in Israel's history.

It offers compelling prayers that confess sin, express renewed hope, and declare total dependence on God's grace.

It is the only book in the Bible written by a person who endured one manifestation of the divine judgement the Bible consistently calls 'the day of the Lord', as confirmed in Joel 2:1-2, Amos 5:18 and Zephaniah 1:14-16.

The book's authorship, setting, contents and theology underline its value for understanding the nature of pain, sin and redemption.

Lamentations agrees with the theology of Leviticus Chapter 26, Deuteronomy Chapters 27-30, Joshua-Kings and Jeremiah in that it affirms that Jerusalem fell:

- Because of the people's sins.
- Because they rejected God's word sent through the prophets.
- Because their leaders led them astray. God warned, but the people did not heed the warning.

It affirms God's faithful, never-ceasing mercy (3:19-24); as confirmed in Deuteronomy 30:1-10. Therefore, readers can know that God is not finished with his people even when they sin greatly.

The book agrees with Psalms in that it affirms that prayers of confession and petition are the means for restoring a broken relationship with God. These poems also coincide with the Psalms in their honest expressions of pain and their dismay at what God has allowed to happen. By attributing what has occurred to God's will, the poems also share the Psalms' emphasis on God's sovereignty as King of creation (Psalm 103:19).

Lamentations agrees with the emphasis on 'the day of the Lord' found in the prophetic books. This day is the day when God will come to judge sin. It can occur in historical contexts like 587BC, or it can occur at the end of time and be the final 'day of the Lord'. Regardless, such days do occur, and people need to take seriously the warnings about such days in Lamentations and the rest of the Bible.

History of Salvation Summary

Isaiah had foretold God's future for Jerusalem: she would be the vehicle for bringing light to all the Gentiles in the Messianic era (Isaiah 2:1-5); but the unfaithful in her midst, who dominated her life and testimony, must be purged from her by disaster, while the faithful remain to build her up (Isaiah 1:24-28). Lamentations is a book for the faithful, enabling them to mourn for Zion's disaster and to pray in hope for her renewal, and thus for the completion of God's saving purpose for the world.

Literary Features

As its title indicates, the Book of Lamentations is a collection of laments, or melancholy dirges, for a ruined society. The poems in the book could also be termed elegies or funeral orations, in which the author expresses deep personal and communal grief for the dead and for all of the suffering that surrounds their loss. In terms of structure, the first four poems are acrostics. This structure, using the entire Hebrew alphabet, matches the poet's intent, which is to give full expression to the suffering of his people and the sorrows of his own soul; in effect, to offer a lament 'from A to Z', or *aleph* to *taw*. Perhaps the highly structured form of the acrostic is also an attempt to impose some sense of order on a tragic situation that is chaotic beyond what anyone can bear.

Lamentations is not an emotional outburst but a formal expression of grief in a high literary style. However, each lament moves rapidly from one topic to the next, revealing that the writer's soul is still in turmoil. Like most elegies, the lyrics in Lamentations deal with profound loss by recollecting past glories and cataloguing what is now gone forever, lamenting the finality of the losses while at the same time seeking consolation in present sorrows and some hope for the future.

Literary type.

Each chapter of Lamentations is a lament, many examples of which exist in the Psalms, e.g. Psalms 3, 13, 44 and 77. Laments in the Psalms vary in format, but they regularly include a description of the problem, protests of innocence, a plea for help, a statement of faith, and a pledge of service when the situation changes. Except for 'pleas of innocence', all these characteristics occur in Lamentations. The 'confession of faith' and 'pledge of service' are also less evident, perhaps because the book focuses on sinful people returning to the Lord rather than faithful people pouring out their hearts to God because of unjust suffering.

Acrostic forms.

An acrostic poem uses the Hebrew alphabet as a key organising principle. Several examples exist in the Bible; Psalm 119 is probably the best known. There is great variety in the acrostic form. Indeed, Lamentations utilises four different types.

Some acrostic poems begin each succeeding line with the next letter of the alphabet. For example, Chapter 1 consists of 22 one-verse sentences. Therefore 1:1 starts with a word that begins with *aleph*, 1:2 uses a word that begins with *beth*, and so forth through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Other acrostic poems open a segment with *aleph* and then begin each succeeding segment with the succeeding letter of the alphabet. Only the first word in a stanza exhibits the acrostic pattern. For example, Chapters 1 and 2 feature 22 three-line verses, for a total of 66 lines. The first word in 1:1, 2:1 and 4:1 begins with an *aleph*; the first word in 1:2, 2:2 and 4:2 begins with *beth*; and so forth.

There are variations on that second type. For example, Chapter 4 follows the same procedure as Chapters 1 and 2, except that each segment is two lines long, for a total of 44 lines.

Still other acrostic poems have stanzas of three lines each that begin with the same letter of the alphabet. Thus, Chapter 3 has 66 lines, like Chapters 1 and 2. But each line in 3:1-3 begins with *aleph*; 3:4-6 has each line begin with *beth*; and so forth. The composition of acrostics requires great skill.

Meter.

Lamentations often utilises *qinah* meter, a type used in some passages that mourn the dead, e.g. Isaiah Chapter 14 and Ezekiel Chapter 27. This rhythm is based on lines of two unequal parts. The first part normally consists of three words and the second part usually includes two words. This pattern creates three accents, then two, thereby creating a falling, rising, and falling cadence. In this way the poems seem to ‘limp’, as if the reader is walking haltingly along behind a funeral procession.

Basic movement.

The acrostic forms noted above convey the book’s movement from Jerusalem’s protest concerning what she has suffered (1:1-22) to her penitent turning to God again (5:1-22). Chapters 1-2 relate Jerusalem’s horrible defeat at the hands of Babylon. People, property, opportunity and hope have all been lost. A narrator and a prophetic voice encourage Jerusalem to turn to God. Jerusalem prays, but almost solely in protest. These chapters are the least acrostic of all the poems, and they portray the least movement toward God.

Chapter 3 presents an individual who counsels Jerusalem to turn to God, just as he has done. His counsel includes statements of what he endured, and of the justice of what he endured, and of the way he came to trust in God’s faithfulness (3:19-24). This most acrostic of the chapters exhibits the most faith in God.

Chapter 4 is much like Chapters 1-2 in its speakers and tone. Jerusalem continues to question the justice of what she has endured, but she admits her sin and takes

comfort in the fact that her pain will soon end. Thus, the two-line acrostic form conveys protest, but less protest than Chapters 1-2.

Chapter 5 is a community lament that presents Jerusalem crying out to God and casting all her future on him. Chapter 5 is to the community what Chapter 3 was for the individual, in that the whole community has come to accept what the individual in Chapter 3 advised.

Outline

- I. The Deserted City (1:1-22)
 - a. Jerusalem's devastation (1:1-11)
 - b. Jerusalem's call for help (1:12-22)
- II. God's Warnings Fulfilled (2:1-22)
 - a. The Effects of God's Punishment (2:1-10)
 - b. The Need to Cry Out to God (2:11-19)
 - c. Jerusalem asks God to See and Act (2:20-22)
- III. God's Steadfast Love Endures (3:1-66)
 - a. Enduring Suffering, Experiencing Faithfulness (3:1-24)
 - b. Responding to God's Goodness and Sovereignty (3:25-39)
 - c. Praying for Renewal (3:40-47)
 - d. Maintaining Confidence in God (3:48-66)
- IV. The Punishment of Zion (4:1-22)
 - a. The Suffering of Jerusalem's Children (4:1-10)
 - b. God's Punishing of Jerusalem's Religious Leaders (4:11-16)
 - c. The Power of Jerusalem's Enemies (4:17-20)
 - d. The End of Jerusalem's Suffering (4:21-22)
- V. Restore Us to Yourself, O Lord (5:1-22)
 - a. A Plea for Mercy (5:1)
 - b. The Woes Jerusalem has Faced (5:2-18)
 - c. A Concluding Prayer for Restoration (5:19-22)