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John MacArthur :: Bible Introductions - Lamentations

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Title

"Lamentations" was derived from a translation of the title as found in the Latin Vulgate (Vg.) translation of the Greek OT, the Septuagint (LXX)[1], and conveys the idea of "loud cries." The Hebrew exclamation *ekah*[2] ("How," which expresses "dismay"), used in 1:1; 2:1, and 4:1, gives the book its Hebrew title. However, the rabbis began early to call the book "loud cries" or "lamentations" (cf. Jer. 7:29). No other entire OT book contains only laments, as does this distressful dirge, marking the funeral of the once beautiful city of Jerusalem (cf. 2:15). This book keeps alive the memory of that fall and teaches all believers how to deal with suffering.

Author and Date

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 [cf. 3:48, 49, etc.]...lamented...and said..." God had told Jeremiah to have Judah lament (Jer. 7:29), and Jeremiah also wrote laments for Josiah (2 Chr. 35:25).

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations as an eyewitness (cf. 1:13–15; 2:6, 9; 4:1–12), possibly with Baruch's secretarial help (cf. 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 ca. 583 B.C. (cf. Jer. 43:1–7). The language used in

Lamentations closely parallels that used by Jeremiah in his much larger prophetic book (cf. 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).

Background and Setting

The prophetic seeds of Jerusalem's destruction were sown through Joshua 800 years in advance (Josh. 23:15, 16). Now, for over 40 years, Jeremiah had prophesied of coming judgment and 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 chaps. 1–29. In Lamentations, he concentrates in more detail on the bitter suffering and heartbreak that was felt over Jerusalem's devastation (cf. Ps. 46:4, 5). So critical was Jerusalem's destruction, that the facts are recorded in 4 separate OT chapters: 2 Kin. 25; Jer. 39:1–11; 52; and 2 Chr. 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 OT 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/Aug.) 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.

Second Kings, Jeremiah, and Lamentations Compared

	2 Kings 25 (See also 2Ch 36:11–21)	Jeremiah	Lamentations
1. The siege of Jerusalem	1, 2	39:1–3; 52:4, 5	2:20–22; 3:5, 7
2. The famine in the city	3	37:21; 52:6	1:11, 19; 2:11, 12; 2:19, 20; 4:4, 5, 9, 10; 5:9, 10
3. The flight of the army and the king	4–7	39:4–7; 52:8–11	1:3, 6; 2:2; 4:19, 20
4. The burning of the palace, temple, and city	8, 9	39:8; 52:13	2:3–5; 4:11; 5:18
5. The breaching of the city walls	10	33:4, 5; 52:7	2:7–9
6. The exile of the populace	11, 12	28:3?[3], 4, 14; 39:9, 10	1:1, 4, 5, 18; 2:9, 14; 3:2, 19; 4:22; 5:2
7. The looting of the temple	13–15	51:51	1:10; 2:6, 7
8. The execution of the leaders	18–21	39:6	1:15; 2:2, 20
9. The vassal status of Judah	22–25	40:9	1:1; 5:8, 9
10. The collapse of the expected foreign help	24:7	27:1–11; 37:5–10	4:17; 5:6

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; cf. Ps. 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 of wrath (1:5, 12, 15; 2:1, 17; 3:37, 38; cf. 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 (cf. 3:18), much of the book appears in the mode of prayer: 1) 1:11, which represents a wailing confession of sin (cf. v. 18); 2) 3:8, with its anguish when God "shuts out my prayer" (cf. Jer. 7:16; Lam. 3:43–54); 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. 50, 51 guarantees); and 4) 5:1–22, with its appeal to heaven for restored mercy (which Jer. 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" (Is. 63:9) was true in principle. God will one day wipe away all tears (Is. 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?

Interpretive Challenges

Certain details pose initial difficulties. Among them are: 1) imprecatory prayers for judgment on other sinners (1:21–22; 3:64–66); 2) the reason for God shutting out prayer (3:8); and 3) the necessity of judgment that is so severe (cf. 1:1, 14; 3:8).

Outline

In the first 4 chapters, each verse begins in an acrostic pattern, i.e., using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 have 22 verses corresponding to 22 letters, while chap. 3 employs each letter for 3 consecutive verses until there are 22 trios, or 66 verses. Chapter 5 is not written alphabetically, although it simulates the pattern in that it has 22 verses. An acrostic order, such as in Ps. 119 (where all 22 Hebrew letters are used in series of 8 verses each), was used to aid memorization. The structure of the book ascends and descends from the great confession in 3:22–24, "Great is His faithfulness," which is the literal center of the book.

1. The First Lament: Jerusalem's Devastation (1:1–22)
    A. Jeremiah's Sorrow (1:1–11)
    B. Jerusalem's Sorrow (1:12–22)
2. The Second Lament: The Lord's Anger Explained (2:1–22)
    A. The Lord's Perspective (2:1–10)
    B. A Human Perspective (2:11–19)
    C. Jeremiah's Prayer (2:20–22)
3. The Third Lament: Jeremiah's Griefs Expressed (3:1–66)
    A. His Distress (3:1–20)
    B. His Hope (3:21–38)
    C. His Counsel/Prayer (3:39–66)
4. The Fourth Lament: God's Wrath Detailed (4:1–22)
    A. For Jerusalem (4:1–20)
    B. For Edom (4:21, 22)
5. The Fifth Lament: The Remnant's Prayers (5:1–22)
    A. To Be Remembered by the Lord (5:1–18)
    B. To Be Restored by the Lord (5:19–22)

Footnotes

1. LXX Septuagint: an ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek.

2. In compliance with Grace To You's Copyright Policy, we are unable to edit the content in any way. It is worth noting in this instance that the MacArthur Study Bible includes a preceding apostrophe to *ekah* that is omitted here.

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