

Lamentations

Purpose: Judahites should experience the prophesied judgment, and realize the prophesied restoration.

Outline: 1:1-22 – Lamentation for Jerusalem

2:1-22 – Lamentation for Judah

3:1-66 – Judah's grief and hope

4:1-22 – Zion's past and present

5:1-22 – Disgrace remembered and Restoration petitioned

Author: Jeremiah is traditionally named as author based on a mis-reading of 2 Chronicles 35:25

Date: The destruction of the Temple was in 586 B.C.

Highlights:

The Hebrew title of this book is derived from the first word of chapters 1, 2, and 4; which is usually translated “how” or “alas” (“How deserted is the city...How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion...How the gold has lost its luster”).

The Latin Vulgate Bible gives it the name of “Lamentations.”

The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), in the title verse, ascribes the poetry to the prophet Jeremiah. There are also similarities between Jeremiah and Lamentations (especially Lam. 3:48-51 and Jer. 14:17).

Orthodox customarily read Lamentations aloud in its entirety on the ninth day of Ab (July/August), which is the traditional date of destruction for Solomon's Temple (in 586 B.D.) and Herod's Temple (in 70 A.D.). Many also read it each week at the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) in Jerusalem. Roman Catholic liturgy includes reading Lamentations during the last three days of Holy Week.

Lamentations is a series of 5 poems, correlating to the 5 chapters of the book.

Poem 1 is a funeral dirge personifying the city of Jerusalem as a once proud and dignified woman, now brutally raped and abandoned by treacherous friends. It is an acrostic poem, in which each verse in succession introduces one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Poem 2 describes the vehemence of Yahweh's anger against Zion. It is an acrostic poem using the same pattern as chapter 1.

Poem 3 is the longest and most-developed acrostic of the book. It contains three-line acrostic stanzas (Psalm 119 uses seven-line acrostic stanzas). The first letter of every three verses begins with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. 22 letters x 3 verses for each letter = 66 verses (note: there are 66 books of the Bible as well – coincidence? Probably). Poem 3 is the literary and theological center of the composition. The poet's complaint contains his personal suffering (representative of the nation, 3:1-20), a prayer of consolation and hope (3:21-29 [“Great is thy faithfulness” vs. 23b]), a plea for repentance and a return to Yahweh (3:40-54), and a cry for vengeance and vindication (3:55-66).

Poem 4 records the grim aftermath of Yahweh's judgment. The Daughter of Zion's only comfort was the knowledge that the punishment for her sins had been accomplished. It returns to the acrostic pattern of chapters 1 and 2 (note: the sixteenth and seventeenth letters of the alphabet in chapters 2 and 4 [2:16-17 and 4:16-17] are inverted, perhaps to emphasize Judah's shame before the nations and Yahweh's irrepressible purposes in history).

Poem 5 is not an acrostic. Also, it is a lamentation of the community rather than an individual lamentation (chapter 3). A lamentation (chapters 3 & 5) is an expression of grief over a catastrophe that is irreversible. A lament (chapters 1, 2, & 4) is an appeal to a merciful God for divine intervention in a desperate situation.

For two centuries the prophets had warned the people of this judgment. The repetition of the threat of divine judgment dulled the ears of the people and insulated them against the idea of repentance. Moreover, the delay of Yahweh's visitation had lulled the nation into a false sense of security.

For two millennium we have been warned that Jesus will return and bring final judgment. We have heard the story of Jesus so many times that we are dulled to the wonder of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Moreover, the delay of Jesus' return has lulled some into believing that he may never return.