

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Lamentations

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Occasion and Date

The book of Lamentations consists of five chapters of Hebrew poetry, joined together by the common themes of sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the humiliation of Judah's population. Individual poems within the book may have been compiled soon after the destruction of the city or anytime between that date and the rebuilding of the temple in 520-515 B.C. None of them gives any indication that the temple has been rebuilt at the time of composition.

Whether the individual poems were all composed in Palestine or in one or more of the exilic communities of Jews in Egypt or Babylon cannot be determined conclusively. Scholars also differ over whether one author wrote all five chapters or a compiler brought together laments of different provenance for a liturgical purpose. The poetic style of the chapters is classical, with a vocalized rhythm characteristic of a lament, and it fits historically in the exilic period.

Authorship

No author is named in the Hebrew version, and the book appears not in the prophetic section of the Hebrew Bible but in the last section, entitled "the Writings." The issue of authorship, regardless of who is responsible for it, is further complicated in that there are different voices expressed within the book. In chapters 1-2, Jerusalem is personified as "Daughter...Zion" (1:6; 2:1, 4, 8, 10, 13, 18) and speaks on occasion (e.g., 1:9b, 11b-16; 2:22) to supplement the poet's voice. An anonymous individual in chapter 3, who possibly should be identified with the poet of the book, speaks through a first-person lament. Plural forms are used in chapter 4, where there are references to "our eyes" (4:17) and (lit.) "out steps" (4:18). The first-person plural voice continues in chapter 5 in what is essentially a communal lament. The creativity of the human author(s) recedes behind the primary function of these poems, which is to articulate grief over the loss of Jerusalem and to speak aloud the devastating effects of Judah's sinfulness.

The earliest claim to human authorship comes in the Greek translation, where the first verse explicitly attributes the book to the weeping prophet Jeremiah. It is plausible, given the fact that the prophecy of Jeremiah itself contains laments/complaints, both for himself and for Jerusalem/Judah. In 2 Chronicles 35:25 Jeremiah is credited with a lamentation for King Josiah (640-609 B.C.), and

its recitation by singers became a custom in Israel. The early association of Lamentations with Jeremiah is the reason that it appears in most modern versions after the prophetic book. As a part of Scripture Lamentations has a complementary function with Jeremiah's prophecies, providing yet another inspired assessment of Judah's fate.

The effects of the Babylonian army in besieging Jerusalem and in finally burning the city and temple precincts are everywhere reflected in the poignancy of the poetry. Someday Judah's humiliation will end (4:22), but there is nothing in the poems to indicate that either Jerusalem or the temple have been rebuilt. In short, the perspective of the voices in Lamentations is that of the Babylonian exile. At some point in the Exile Judeans began to lament corporately and publicly in order to remember Jerusalem, the capital city, the location of the temple.

Structure and Literary Style of the Book

Each of the chapters is arranged in a recognizable pattern – that is, they are in poetry – and each follows an aspect of the Semitic alphabet. Chapters 1-4 are known as acrostics because the poetic verses are arranged in a pattern following the sequence of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of each verse in chapters 1 and 2 begins with a different letter of the alphabet and follows the alphabetic sequence of twenty-two letters from beginning to end. That is, 1:1 and 2:1 begin with a word whose initial letter is *aleph* (א), and 1:22 and 2:22 begin with a word whose initial letter is *taw* (ת). Chapter 3 has sixty-six verses but follows the same acrostic pattern, in three-verse units. Chapter 4 follows the pattern outlines for chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 5 is somewhat different; it has twenty-two verses – as do chapters 1,2, and 4 – but the initial word of each verse in chapter 5 does not follow the alphabetical sequence. For this reason, most scholars do not describe chapter 5 as an acrostic. Although technically correct, the number of verses in chapter 5 is not likely coincidence.

Perhaps the best explanation is that the pattern is meant to signify fullness or completeness, something like the English expression “from A to Z” or the expression in the Revelation to John that the risen Lord is “the Alpha and the Omega....the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13; cf. 1:8).

Within the literature of the Old Testament, the book of Lamentations has literary parallels with funeral laments, the psalms of lament/complaint, Job's complaints against God and friends, and prophetic oracles against nations. On hearing the

account of Saul and Jonathan's death, for example, David composed a poetic funeral oration (2 Samuel 1:19-27). Repeatedly the book of Lamentations refers to the fall and humiliation of Jerusalem, who is personified as a princess (Lamentations 1:1, 6), one cast down from heaven (2:1), and as perfect in beauty (2:15).

Approximately half of Psalms is comprised of individual and corporate laments/complaints, with those of individuals being the most frequent. These psalms have some or all of the following formal characteristics: complaints and/or cries of dereliction, petitions for deliverance and/or judgment on the enemies, confessions of sin, expressions of trust, and vows.

The city of Babylon ("Virgin Daughter...Babylon", 47:1) is depicted as a humiliated queen, bereft of her symbols of royalty and exposed shamefully. Widowhood will be her fate as judgment for her oppression and cruelty falls on her. The personification of Babylon as an exposed female, as a widow bereft of children, and as helpless before the onslaught are all portrayals repeated for Jerusalem in Lamentations.

Theology and Significance

The poetry provided a vehicle for a communal voice to lament the horror of Judah's fall. At some point in the exilic period, God's people used the poetry that now comprises the book in public ceremonies of lamenting the temple's destruction.

All human beings have a deep-seated need to process grief, death, and loss, or to put it colloquially, "to come to grips with grief." The prevalent mode of doing so in modern Western culture has been through psychological understanding and therapeutic practices.

Most likely, Lamentations gave form and procedure to mourning on the part of Judeans, but it did so without the self-consciousness and introspection that comes so "naturally" to modern readers and their analysts. While moderns think rightly of Lamentations as a form of literature, Judeans in exile understood the poetry as some thing to be performed. They recited it, sang it, and prayed it. This process brought to mind the continuing influence of a formative event. Furthermore, it helped define Judean corporate identity.

Grief, complaint and hope in God. It is highly significant that there is no attempt anywhere in Lamentations to request restoration. All that is asked for is God's

return. God continues to be remembered, and the memory is kept alive in the complaints. They are placed before God in the hope that God's compassion will be aroused.

In a public and prayerful way, Judeans were gifted with the opportunity to bring their pain and grief before the same God who had used the Babylonians to judge them and their ancestors. Like the insistent visitor at midnight (Luke 11:5-8) or the widow appealing to the judge (Luke 18:1-8), those who prayed the Lamentations brought the circumstances of their corporate identity before God.

Suffering and Confession of Sin

Lamentations holds together the grief that comes from tragedy and the pain that comes in acknowledging sin and its consequences. When one thinks corporately, the question is not, "How is this event a response to *me*?" but "How is this event a response to *us*?"

Lamentations and the New Testament. It is none other than Jesus who provides the primary place for lament in the New Testament. Apart from his practice, lamentation is not common in the New Testament. Jesus wept over Jerusalem as a sign of his grief regarding its unbelief and the consequences to come from it (Luke 19:41-44). In his Gethsemane prayer he sweated and prayed for the cup of suffering to be removed from him, but he finally placed himself in God's hands (22:39-46). This is a posture similar to the prayers in Lamentations – similar in the sense that one resolutely casts his or her fate into the hands of a God who seems absent at a moment of real need or perhaps remote and inscrutable.

Jesus' painful death on the cross is punctuated by the cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is, moreover, a quotation from a psalm of lament/complaint (Psalm 22:1).

J. Andrew Dearman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah/Lamentations*