

# **The Book of Lamentations, an Introductory Study**

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## **The Name of the Book and its Place in the Canon**

In the Hebrew text the Book is named after its first word, **הֵבִינָה**, meaning, “Ah, how!” In the Septuagint, however, the book receives its name from the contents of the book. The Septuagint title simply reads **θρῆνοι** (tears) and adds a subscript ‘of Jeremiah.’ The Latin Vulgate retains the title ‘tears’ (*threni*) and adds the interpretation, ‘*id est lamentationes Jeremiae prophetae*’. It is from the Vulgate that the English translations take their title for this book, The Lamentations of Jeremiah.

In the Hebrew canon Lamentations was placed just after Ruth in the *Megilloth* (rolls) of the *Kethubhim* (writings) or *Hagiographa* (sacred writings), the Hebrew canon being divided into the *torah* (the writings of Moses), the *nebhim* (the writings of the called prophets) and the *ketubhim* (the writings of other holy men of God). The Septuagint places Lamentations after the prophecy of Jeremiah and the apocryphal book of Baruch, and this position was later adopted by the other versions, including the Vulgate. The English versions (and Luther) adopt the Septuagint placement of the book. The authenticity of its place in the Old Testament canon has never been questioned.

## **The Authorship of Lamentations**

According to both Jewish and Christian tradition the author of Lamentations was the Prophet Jeremiah. This tradition already appears in the Septuagint, “*And it came to pass after Israel had been taken away into captivity and Jerusalem had been laid waste that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem and said.*” The Vulgate repeats these words and adds to them, “*with a bitter spirit sighing and wailing.*” The early Church Fathers, such as Origen and Jerome, unanimously accepted Jeremiah as the author of this book.

But the book itself does not claim to be the work of Jeremiah. The idea of Jeremiah’s authorship may have originated with II Chronicles 35:25, “*Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the men and women singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the laments.*” The ‘laments’ mentioned here were written specifically for King Josiah. Since Josiah is neither mentioned nor referred to in this book, it is not probable that the two books could be the same. But this does not preclude the possibility that Jeremiah did write Lamentations.

Jeremiah’s authorship of Lamentations was never seriously questioned until the year 1712 when Hermann von der Hardt of Helmstaedt denied the possibility of Jeremiah’s authorship, instead proposing that the five chapters were written by five men: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and King Jehoiachin. Modern critics today still reject the authorship of Jeremiah on so-called internal evidence. But there are still many similarities between Jeremiah and Lamentations.

Both books have the same viewpoint, the same manner of presentation, and the same writing characteristics. Both books point over and over again at the great guilt of the covenant people as being the cause of the unfortunate destruction of Jerusalem. Both books have a definite monotony in expression and presentation. The Old Testament scholar, Wengstenberg, offers this

explanation of all these similarities, “Whoever is sad and sorrowful of heart and has wet eyes swimming in tears, does not adorn and ornament himself in clothing and in speech.”

Jeremiah himself says, “*Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.*” (Jer. 9:1) And in Lamentations we read, “*My eyes fail from weeping. I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed.*” Each book repeats very similar expressions and pictures. Jeremiah, as an eyewitness of the destruction of Jerusalem, was certainly in a position to have written this book of Lamentations from his own experience. For he was a witness of all the horrors that occurred during the siege and destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

The dating of the book presents little problem. From the book itself we learn that the author was himself an eyewitness of the disaster that struck Jerusalem in 587 B.C. For the destruction of Jerusalem is so vividly described. The first four chapters may have been written soon after the deportation of the Jews to Babylon, and the final dirge shortly after that. There seems to be no reason for placing the completed book any later than 550 B.C.

### **The Structural Form of the Book**

Each of the five chapters of Lamentations has a carefully worked out structure. Chapters one, two, four and five have twenty-two verses each, while Chapter three has sixty-six verses. This is not accidental. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters in it, and the number twenty-two comes to designate the idea of completeness.

More exactly, however, chapters one through four are known as acrostics. The fifth chapter, while not an acrostic, has been accommodated to the acrostic structure by also having twenty-two lines, in exact correspondence to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In the acrostic chapter, each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. The exception is chapter three, where three verses begin with each letter of the alphabet. There are three Aleph lines, three Beth lines, etc. Some commentaries have suggested that this form was employed as an aid to memorizing the poem. But this is uncertain. Because of the frequent repetition of the same Hebrew words at the beginning of several verses in different chapters, the acrostic nature of the poem could prove more of a hindrance than a help for memorization.

Perhaps the monotonous ritual of going through the entire alphabet reflects the mournful regularity of ancient lamentation and wailing. In this way the poet is seen as expressing the fullness of human suffering from A to Z. The pure acrostic form is not carried out in its entirety in Chapters two, three and four, as it is in the first chapter. This shows how the sacred poets were not slaves to form, but made use of the formal scheme only as long as the sequence of the alphabet suited the sequence of their thought. This is also true of the other thirteen acrostics (or partial acrostics) recorded in the Old Testament.

All commentators agree that the first four chapters are of a common meter. The lines are unequally divided, the first stich (or half-line) being the longer. This meter is identified as basically having a 3/2 stress, the so-called *qinah* or dirge meter. The meter is seldom found in a rigid form, but frequently is broken up by a 2/2 or 2/3 or 3/3 pattern. The final chapter is written in the more familiar Hebrew 3/3 rhythm.

The elegiac form of poetry is not confined to Lamentations in the Old Testament. We have David’s song of elegy on Saul and Jonathon (2 Samuel 1:17f) and on Abner (2 Samuel 3:33f). There are additional examples in Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and II Chronicles. Psalms 39, 79 and 80 are also examples of this special form of poetry. The *qinah* meter of Hebrew poetry is usually reserved for occasions of deep sorrow and grief over some great loss.

### **The Historical Background of the Book**

Jeremiah was the Prophet appointed by God to foretell Judah's doom immediately before the Babylonian Captivity. Yet there had been a prelude to Jeremiah's prophecy in that of Isaiah, who gave the divine prediction of Judah's fate about 100 years before Jeremiah. When the Lord called Isaiah to be a prophet, He gave him a very somber, gloomy message that he was to proclaim to Judah, a message that the Lord had brought on Israel the divine judgment of hardening. (Isaiah 6: 9 - 12)

9 He said, "Go and tell this people:  
    "Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
    be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'  
10 Make the heart of this people calloused;  
    make their ears dull  
    and close their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
    hear with their ears,  
    understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed." (Isaiah 6:9,10)

The Lord's prophecy that Isaiah's preaching would only harden the people's hearts more brought forth a loving, heartfelt concern for the prophet's people, as Isaiah asked the Lord how long the people would be under this judgment of hardening. The Lord's answer was clear and simple. The people would remain in their sad, self-induced condition until a judgment would be executed on them.

"Until the cities lie ruined  
    and without inhabitant,  
until the houses are left deserted  
    and the fields ruined and ravaged,  
until the LORD has sent everyone far away  
    and the land is utterly forsaken." (Isaiah 6:11,12)

Through His prophet Jeremiah the Lord gave a very grim picture of the judgment that awaited Jerusalem and Judah. Before the bulk of the people would be led away into captivity, thousands would die by the swords of the enemy besieging Jerusalem. Other thousands would die of famine as the Babylonian armies sealed off Jerusalem from its food supplies and starved its people into submission. Wild dogs would feed on the dead bodies.

Listen! The report is coming—  
a great commotion from the land of the north!  
It will make the towns of Judah desolate,  
a haunt of jackals. (Jeremiah 10:22)

The reason why this total destruction is irrevocable is stated by the Lord through His prophet Jeremiah.

You have rejected me," declares the LORD.  
    "You keep on backsliding.  
So I will lay hands on you and destroy you;

I can no longer show compassion. (Jeremiah 15:6)

The judgment finally came upon Judah just as God had foretold. Judah's King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon. Soon King Nebuchadnezzar and his whole army were besieging Jerusalem. After eighteen months of siege the city fell to Nebuchadnezzar and was burnt to the ground and looted by his army. The book of Lamentations gives us an eye-witness account of the terrifying things that happened during the fall of Jerusalem.

### **The Contents of the Book**

The Book of Lamentations consists of five separate songs, each one independent of the others, that together mourn over the downfall of a once great city, nation and people. Three of these songs begin with a deep cry of grief, pain and anguish. It is not possible to capture the full meaning of this little word in English. We might simply say: "*Oh my, oh my, how deserted lies this city.*" (Lam. 1:1); "*Oh my, Oh my, how the Lord has covered .the Daughters of Zion with His cloud of anger*" (Lam. 2:1); and "*Oh my, oh my, how the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold become dull*" ( Lam. 4 :1) All of the songs tell the same story about the great misery and disgrace that came upon Judah. But the point of view changes with each one of the individual songs.

In the *first song* of lament the writer, with a force that could tear you apart, expresses his deep grief over the carrying away of the people into captivity, and the desolation of Zion. He sings about the oppression, the plundering, the famine, the scorn and the contempt of the enemy that accompanied the fall of Jerusalem. He weeps over the wounded and comfortless situation of the city now fallen to such depths of woe and abandonment. We need only read the opening words of the first chapter to see this picture.

How deserted lies the city,  
    once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she,  
    who once was great among the nations!  
She who was queen among the provinces  
    has now become a slave.  
Bitterly she weeps at night,  
    tears are upon her cheeks.  
Among all her lovers  
    there is none to comfort her.  
All her friends have betrayed her;  
    they have become her enemies.  
After affliction and harsh labor,  
    Judah has gone into exile.  
She dwells among the nations;  
    she finds no resting place.  
All who pursue her have overtaken her  
    in the midst of her distress.  
The roads to Zion mourn,  
    for no one comes to her appointed feasts.  
All her gateways are desolate,  
    her priests groan,  
her maidens grieve,

and she is in bitter anguish. (Lamentations 1:1-4)

The *second song* describes the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah as an act of the divine wrath of God because of the sins of the people. It shows the foolishness and uselessness of seeking human comfort during such a horrible calamity and instead urges the people to seek help from their God. Here we read these words:

How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion  
with the cloud of his anger!  
He has hurled down the splendor of Israel  
from heaven to earth;  
he has not remembered his footstool  
in the day of his anger.  
Without pity the Lord has swallowed up  
all the dwellings of Jacob;  
in his wrath he has torn down  
the strongholds of the Daughter of Judah.  
He has brought her kingdom and its princes  
down to the ground in dishonor. (Lamentations 2:1-2)

The Scriptures often speak of the state, the land and the people of God using the feminine gender as in a daughter, a woman or a widow. That picture is brought out vividly in this song by the writer.

What can I say for you?  
With what can I compare you,  
O Daughter of Jerusalem?  
To what can I liken you,  
that I may comfort you,  
O Virgin Daughter of Zion?  
Your wound is as deep as the sea.  
Who can heal you?  
All who pass your way  
clap their hands at you;  
they scoff and shake their heads  
at the Daughter of Jerusalem:  
“Is this the city that was called  
the perfection of beauty,  
the joy of the whole earth?”  
All your enemies open their mouths  
wide against you;  
they scoff and gnash their teeth  
and say, “We have swallowed her up.  
This is the day we have waited for;  
we have lived to see it. (Lamentations 2:13,15,16)

The people’s enemies gloat over Judah’s destruction. But the real cause of the destruction must not be neglected. And the people must return to the Lord to seek His forgiveness.

The LORD has done what he planned;

he has fulfilled his word,  
which he decreed long ago.  
He has overthrown you without pity,  
he has let the enemy gloat over you,  
he has exalted the horn of your foes.  
The hearts of the people  
cry out to the Lord.  
O wall of the Daughter of Zion,  
let your tears flow like a river  
day and night;  
give yourself no relief,  
your eyes no rest. (Lamentations 2:17,18)

The *third song* depicts the great spiritual suffering of the pious during the common catastrophe. These sufferings are the subject of a very painful complaint. We read this in the opening verses:

I am the man who has seen affliction  
by the rod of his wrath.  
He has driven me away and made me walk  
In darkness rather than light;  
He has made my skin and my flesh grow old  
and has broken my bones.  
He has walled me in so I cannot escape;  
he has weighed me down with chains.  
Even when I call out or cry for help,  
he shuts out my prayer.  
He has barred my way with blocks of stone;  
he has made my paths crooked.  
Like a bear lying in wait,  
like a lion in hiding, (Lamentations 3:1,2,4,7-10)

It is then in this third song the holy writer rises to great heights. He writes not only of the righteousness of the divine judgment on the land as was carried out in the destruction of Jerusalem, but also of the love and compassion of the Lord and bases all future hope for help on Him. Here we read the heartwarming words which have been prayed by the whole church and individual members of, that church in great times of earthly and spiritual need.

So I say, "My splendor is gone  
and all that I had hoped from the LORD."  
I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.  
I well remember them,  
and my soul is downcast within me.  
Yet this I call to mind  
and therefore I have hope:  
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning;  
    great is your faithfulness.  
I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;  
    therefore I will wait for him."  
The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,  
    to the one who seeks him;  
It is good to wait quietly  
    for the salvation of the LORD.  
For men are not cast off  
    by the Lord forever.  
Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,  
    so great is his unfailing love.  
For he does not willingly bring affliction  
    or grief to the children of men.      (Lamentations 3:18-26; 31-33)

Such trust in divine mercy can only take place when a man deeply humbles himself before his God and Lord. He needs to acknowledge and repent of his sins. The writer brings out this message very clearly before the eyes *of* this people when he writes:

Why should any living man complain  
    when punished for his sins?  
Let us examine our ways and test them,  
    and let us return to the LORD.  
Let us lift up our hearts and our hands  
    to God in heaven, and say:  
"We have sinned and rebelled  
    and you have not forgiven.  
Streams of tears flow from my eyes  
    because my people are destroyed.  
My eyes will flow unceasingly,  
    without relief,  
until the LORD looks down  
    from heaven and sees.      (Lamentations 3:39-42, 48-50)

Then, at the end of this third song we hear the confident prayer of a true, repentant, trusting child of God:

I called on your name, O LORD,  
    from the depths of the pit.  
You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears  
    to my cry for relief."  
You came near when I called you,  
    and you said, "Do not fear."  
O Lord, you took up my case;  
    you redeemed my life.      (Lamentations 3:55-58)

In the *fourth song* the frightening misery that has been heaped upon the sons and daughters of Zion is presented as a divine punishment for the great sins of the people and especially their leaders. Again this is vividly portrayed by the writer:

But it happened because of the sins of her prophets  
and the iniquities of her priests,  
who shed within her  
the blood of the righteous.  
Now they grope through the streets  
like men who are blind.  
They are so defiled with blood  
that no one dares to touch their garments.  
“Go away! You are unclean!” men cry to them.  
“Away! Away! Don’t touch us!”  
When they flee and wander about,  
people among the nations say,  
“They can stay here no longer.”  
The LORD himself has scattered them;  
he no longer watches over them.  
The priests are shown no honor,  
the elders no favor.

In verse twenty the writer laments that even the King himself was carried away into captivity. “The LORD’s anointed, our very life breath, was caught in their traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations” (Lamentations 4:20) The King was the go-between of the Lord on earth. He came from the family of David. This was the family of promise. The King was the guarantee that sometime in the future the great King, the Messiah, would come out of this family. And now this King was taken captive in a well-deserved punishment from God. With both eyes plucked out he was led off in disgrace to Babylon.

Finally we come to the *fifth* and last song. This final song is not so much of a lamentation as it is an ardent prayer of the writer, in which he implores the Lord to remove the disgrace of His people and to reinstate them in their former relationship of grace. Water and wood are named by the writer as the greatest necessities of life, without which the people cannot live. Yet the Lord has taken even these things away from His people!

Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us;  
look, and see our disgrace.  
Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens,  
our homes to foreigners.  
We have become orphans and fatherless,  
our mothers like widows.  
We must buy the water we drink;  
our wood can be had only at a price.  
Those who pursue us are at our heels;  
we are weary and find no rest.

And then at the end of the chapter follows a very heart rending plea that lays hold on the love, mercy and grace of God in faith and trust:



Because of this our hearts are faint,  
because of these things our eyes grow dim  
for Mount Zion, which lies desolate,  
with jackals prowling over it.  
You, O LORD, reign forever;  
your throne endures from generation to generation.  
Why do you always forget us?  
Why do you forsake us so long?  
Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return;  
renew our days as of old  
unless you have utterly rejected us  
and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lamentations 5:17-22)

### **The Message of the Book**

The book of Job expresses the grief of an individual under the chastening hand of God. In the book of Lamentations the inspired writer gives expression to the collective grief of an entire people. He leads them to acknowledge the justice of God in His judgment over them and calls for them to repent and confess their sins and to return once again to their God and Lord.

The meaning of the book is still the same for us today. Over and over again the New Testament church has learned from this book how it should bow beneath the chastening hand of its Lord in difficult times and acknowledge its own sinfulness. The church has no reason to ever murmur against God's leading, but only against its own sinfulness. We should follow the guidance of this book in searching our innermost selves and then turn to our Lord for forgiveness, as is so forcibly stated in chapter three verses thirty-nine through forty-two.

It is true that, like the Jews of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., we all bear the mark of our times. We all have a part in the immoral conditions and sins of our own land. We, as a people, bear the same guilt that brought upon Judah her great chastisement and visitation from the Lord. And so we, as a people, need to recognize our own sins and on their account humble ourselves before God, which is the entire purpose of this book.

This is specially true of our church life. Like the Jews of old, we too are tempted to boast, "Here is the Lord's Church. We are the church of pure doctrine. We are the possessors of the truth." This is true. But there is a danger here of becoming so satisfied and proud about the fact that we have inherited this church from our fathers, that we might never make this inheritance personally ours. Where is the seriousness and zeal to serve in our congregations that testified to the personal spirituality of our fathers? We must realize that we too stand in danger that our entire confession and Christianity may become routine and mechanical. We so easily forget, as Luther says, that we, as Christians, derive our name from Christ. Consciously we ought to strive to come closer to Him and always hold on to Him as our Savior and strive to become more and more like Him.

Another danger to our church life today is that we like the Jews, might become so caught up with the external aspects of our congregations that we might begin to overlook the true spiritual character of the church. We are proud of the fact that our congregations and Conference are growing larger and stronger. But we forget that the church flourishes best under the cross and that the promises were given to the 'remnant' and not to the large masses. We want our church to expand, but never at the expense of losing the clear, true witness of the Word of God. We have seen this danger become a reality in all the unionistic mergers of fellow Lutheran bodies during

our own lifetime. Can it be pleasing to God if we round off the pointed corners and break off the sharp points of His Word in order to fit into the mainstream of Christianity? More and more the boundaries that separate us from the rest of the world are being broken down. The message of Lamentations speaks very clearly to the point. The time will come when the Lord will call His church to account for itself.

It is perhaps significant that the ancient Christian church applied this book to the One upon whom God's justice fell in order to pay for the sins of the entire world. The Roman Catholic Church has continued this custom by continuing to read lessons from the book of Lamentations on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Saturday. A similar custom was observed in the old Lutheran church in Europe. Nikolaus Selnecker, the co-author of the Formula of Concord and author of many fine hymns, captured the entire concept of Lamentations in the German language in the liturgy used on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, a day set aside to remember the destruction of Jerusalem. On this day according to old-Lutheran customs the story of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was read in all the churches. When we read and re-read the book of Lamentations in this sense and spirit and consider and reflect on its message and take it to heart, then we too will receive the true profit and blessing from it and join in the prayer found in the second to the last verse of the book: "Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21). This faithful, merciful God, true to His faithful, sure promises, will not let such a prayer go unheard.