

Lamentations

Lamentations 1-2

The poems of Lamentations have no author's name attached, but ancient Jewish and Christian traditions ascribe the book to Jeremiah. Jeremiah is known to have composed laments, poems of grief or anguish (see 2 Chronicles 35:25, Jeremiah 9:1-11), and these laments focus on the downfall of Jerusalem, which was a matter of personal anguish to Jeremiah, who lived through it all. The book was composed after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC, and before the rebuilding of the temple in 520-516 BC. Most likely within a few years of 586.

The structure of the book includes 5 poems, each a separate chapter in our English Bibles. In chapters 1, 2, and 4 each verse begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. 22 letters, 22 verses. The verses of 1 & 2 are each 3 lines long in Hebrew, and the verses of chapter 4 are each 2 lines long. Again, each of them follows the Hebrew alphabet in the first letter of each verse. Chapter 3 is enumerated in our English Bibles as 66 verses, but follows the same acrostic structure. In chapter 3 the first lines of every 3 verses in a row begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, still amounting to 22 (X3) alphabetic verses. Chapter 5 retains the the structure of 22 verses, but not the alphabetic sequence.

Lamentations 1:1, "How lonely sits the city..." The core theme of the book is mourning the downfall of Jerusalem, her destruction, the death of the people, great and small, the deportation, the destruction of the temple... all the themes of Jeremiah's prophecies. Jerusalem is pictured as a shamed princess, an unfaithful wife betrayed by her lovers, beauty despoiled and comforts lost.

In 1:1-10 Jerusalem is described in 3rd person singular. Then in 1:11-16 she speaks of her own desolation, with imagery used in Jeremiah's prophecies (the yoke, v14, the winepress, v15). Jerusalem's lament continues in 1:18-22 with confessions of guilt and pleas for divine vengeance on those who have dealt treacherously with Jerusalem.

Lament #2, chapter 2, focuses on the Lord's anger against Jerusalem for her sins. Finally, as the Jeremiah had foretold, there was not mercy and Jerusalem with her rulers and all were struck down in divine fury. Israel's true splendor had been the presence of God in the place he chose, the resting place of the ark was the LORD's footstool (21) and it had been cast down from heaven. The temple like a tent in a garden had been overthrown (2:6). In her final days, everyone in Jerusalem had suffered hunger and deprivation. As in Jeremiah the prophets who offered also assurances were guilty of iniquity (2:14) and suffered for their lies. The horrors of the famine in Jerusalem's final siege were pitiful, especially because they were self-inflicted.

Lamentations 3-5

The 3rd lament (chapter 3) is the center and heart of Lamentations. Each line of each set of 3 verses begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, v1-3 A (aleph), v4-6 B (Beth), and so forth. 22 Hebrew letters, 3 verses per letter, 66 verses total.

The first 20 verses of chapter 3 echo complaints Jeremiah made to the LORD of the tremendous

burden God had laid upon him. See Jeremiah 9:1-6, 12:1-4, 15:10ff, etc. The tone shifts in 3:21-42 to a psalm of hope. These verses in the center of Lamentations 3 are the center of the book, and the heart of the message. Circumstances were horrific, but there is hope in the LORD in all circumstances. v22-24 have been arranged as a lovely song in English.

In the heart of chapter 3, we have v28-29 that are directed to the believer, and is especially fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who humbled himself in the dust, and accepted the blows to his cheek and the insults heaped upon him for our sake, he being our hope. v40-42 addresses the human component of redemption, let's repent and acknowledge our sins and our need of God.

3:52ff conflate the experiences of Joseph and Jonah and Jeremiah, and again come to completion in the suffering of the Messiah, who warned his own generation of the condemnation that would fall upon them if they did not accept him.

Chapter 4 goes back to A (aleph) and gives us another sequence of 22 alphabetic sets of 2 Hebrew lines each, observing the wasting away of Zion, the famine that was a prelude to her destruction. The famine was the worst, much worse than dying in battle (4:9). The religious leaders had failed in their duties and brought destruction upon the city (v13). Notice that the LORD referred to some prophets as "my servants the prophets" (Jeremiah 7:25) and other prophets as "her prophets... her priests" (Lamentations 4:13). There are always prophet and priests who work for the people, for wages, rather than for the LORD, and their work leads to the shedding of the blood of the righteous.

The "land of Uz" is mentioned in Lamentations 4:21. It was also mentioned in Jeremiah 25:20. Here it is associated with Edom, south of the Dead Sea. Job was from the land of Uz (Job 1:1). Perhaps the same area.

The 5th lament, chapter 5, once again is shaped by the Hebrew alphabet, with 22 Hebrew lines, but is not alphabetic. The desperate state of affairs in the conquered land is highlighted, note the contrast of 5:15 to Psalm 30:11 where David glorified God for victory over his foes. The kingdom has come full circle. But... v19, the LORD still reigns, always reigns, and so there is the appeal for restoration, v21, and while that was partially fulfilled when Jerusalem was reinhabited and the temple rebuilt, the real renewal awaited the coming of the Christ.