

First Impressions of the Book of Lamentations

Setting:

The setting of this book is the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC to the Babylonians. The imagery described involves a city being severely besieged, and subsequently lying in ruins with only a few beleaguered inhabitants.

Author:

While the book does not explicitly state its author, early Jewish and Christian traditions claim that it was composed by the prophet Jeremiah. Factors favoring this view include the apparent eyewitness account of Jerusalem's devastation and the occurrence of similar phrases in Jeremiah such as "terrors on every side" (compare 2:22 with Jer 6:25) and "restore...that we may return" (compare 5:21 with Jer 31:18). Regardless of his identity, the author sympathetically identifies with the plight of his people and their beloved city. Furthermore, he appears to have been an eyewitness of Jerusalem's final defeat and had literal access to its ruins once the Babylonians had taken away the surviving captives to exile.

Audience:

The author's words appear to primarily provide an avenue for the surviving remnant of Judah to voice its grief and come to terms with its rebellion towards the LORD and the painful consequences that resulted. Secondly, the audience appears to be the LORD Himself, before Whom the prophet weeps and begs for mercy and restoration on behalf of his beloved city and fellow countrymen. Finally, this Book, in the tradition of a true biblical lament, provides the LORD's people in any era with a 'template' for honestly processing the grief (and at times, guilt) of personal or national tragedy while not descending into the abyss of utter hopelessness. To those of the author's audience who are listening, the way through and out of life's ruins is by placing one's hope entirely in the LORD, whose steadfast love never ceases.

Themes:

- Agonized lament over Jerusalem's complete destruction
- Acknowledgement of Judah's sin and her deserved punishment from the LORD
- Plea for the LORD to restore, based on His unfailing love

Outline:

The book is composed of five poems individually defined by our modern chapter designations. All five poems are ordered according to the sequence of the Hebrew alphabet, which contains 22 letters. The first four chapters are acrostic in nature, where consecutive letters in the alphabet begin each verse (see example from chap. 3 involving a triple acrostic below). Such a literary device may have been employed for the purpose of learning and memorization, and perhaps as a method for emphasizing the complete devastation of Jerusalem (as in English we would say, from 'A' to 'Z').

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| I. The Desolation of Jerusalem (1:1-22) | 3.1 אָנִי הַגִּבֹּר רָאָה עֵינַי בְּשֹׁבֵט עִבְרֵתוֹ:
3.2 אוֹתֵי נְהַג וְיִלְךָ תִּשָּׁף וְלֹא-אוֹר: |
| II. The LORD's Anger against His City (2:1-22) | 3.3 אָךְ בֵּי יֹשֵׁב יִהְפֹּךְ יָדוֹ כְּלַ-הַיּוֹם ס:
3.4 בְּלֵה בְּשָׂרֵי וְעוֹרַי שִׁבְרַ עֲצָמוֹתַי:
3.5 בְּגֵה עָלַי וַיִּקַּף רֹאשׁ וַתִּלְאַה: |
| III. A Lament of Grief and Hope (3:1-66) | 3.6 בְּמַחְשָׁבִים הוֹשִׁיבֵנִי כְּמַתִּי עוֹלָם ס:
3.7 גָּדַר בְּעַדַי וְלֹא אֶצְא הַכְּבִיד נְחֻשְׁתִּי:
3.8 גַּם כִּי אֲזַעַק וְאֲשׁוּעַ שְׁתֵּם תִּפְלֹתַי:
3.9 גָּדַר דְּרָכַי כְּגֹזִית נְתִיבַתִּי עוֹהָ ס: |
| IV. Sufferings from Jerusalem's Siege (4:1-22) | |
| V. A Prayer for Restoration (5:1-22) | |

Readings and Reflections on Lamentations

To the class: Please read the entire book of Lamentations in preparation for Thursday. However, due to time constraints, we will concentrate on the following readings during class time. We will first look at chaps 1, 2, 4 and 5. These describe the plight of Jerusalem and its populace in a collective sense. We will close with chapter 3 where the author, as an individual, attempts to process the calamity for himself.

1. The Desolation of Jerusalem (1:1-22)

Reading #1 - 1:1-5

Reading #2 - 1:12-16

2. The LORD's Anger against His City (2:1-22)

Reading #3 - 2:5-8

Reading #4 - 2:14-19

3. Sufferings from Jerusalem's Siege (4:1-22)

Reading #5 - 4:7-10

Reading # 6 - 4:17-20

4. A Prayer for Restoration (5:1-22)
Reading #7 - 5:15-22

5. A Personal Lament of Grief and Hope (3:1-66)

- Calling a spade a _____ (1-20)
- Recalling the LORD's sterling _____ in time of trouble (21-24)
- It is a time to _____ (25-33)
- If there is sin, it is a time to _____ (37-42)
- It is a time to freely _____ (48-51)
- It is a time to recall the LORD's past _____ (52-57)
- If there is injustice, it is a time to appeal to the _____ over all mankind (58-66)

6. Closing thoughts:

Do we wait for dread calamity to strike our nation, community or personal life before we dust off this information and try to apply it?

We have been *trying* today to appreciate the sense of loss the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day must have felt for their ruined city, burnt temple, crushed (Davidic) dynasty, and their murdered or exiled loved ones. The New Testament clearly indicates that trials are still a very real part of being a follower of Christ. However, there's a decided advantage offered to Christians when they tread through treacherous waters: the One who died and rose again to sit at the right hand of God is interceding on their behalf and making them more than conquerors through the worst circumstances conceivable (Rom 8:18-39).