

Lamentations

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed,
Because His compassions fail not.
They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness (Lam 3:22–23)

Fresh from the awful experience of Jerusalem's devastation by the fierce Babylonians the prophet Jeremiah composes a funeral dirge expressing the sorrow, loneliness, and despair into which the nation had fallen as a result of Yahweh's terrible action against them. Yet his lament was not without hope as he pauses at mid-point to focus on the mercy and compassion of the Lord that was still available even while in the crucible of deserved suffering. Though this affliction was deserved there was still the possibility of repentance and restoration because Yahweh's faithfulness is great. Just as he had been faithful to bring upon Israel the negative consequences of their covenant violations (Deut 28) so he could be trusted to restore them to the blessings of the same (Deut 30:1–10).

Authorship

The title comes from the Septuagint and Latin Vulgate titles. The Hebrew Bible used the first word, which might be translated by something like “Ah, how!”, the characteristic beginning of a lament.¹ There are no explicit statements in the book identifying the author. It has by tradition been attributed to Jeremiah and does share with his prophecy a number of similarities in style, subject matter, and tone.² It is clearly the work of an eye-witness who understood the connections between Jerusalem's fate and Israel's

¹ R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 195.

² *Ibid.*, 197-98. Harrison concludes that “while the authorship of the work must necessarily remain unknown, it seems highly improbable that anyone other than Jeremiah would have been moved to such depths of elegiac expression by the collapse of resistance in Jerusalem and still be in a position to record his feelings in such moving verse” (198). See also C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 269-71.

sinful and rebellious behavior. The message of the book is not obscured by the absence of a clear statement of authorship.

Date

The events described are connected with Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C. The first four chapters exhibit a vividness that argues for it being written not long after the situation it depicts. There is no necessity to put its writing as late as 550 B.C. as some do. If Jeremiah was the author of Lamentations, the book would likely have been written before he was taken to Egypt (583-82 B.C.), perhaps as early as late 586 B.C.³

Historical Setting

Jerusalem had experienced three separate incursions by the Babylonians, the last of which (in 586 B.C.) culminated in the utter destruction of the temple and city accompanied by a third deportation of its inhabitants. At the writing of Lamentations, Israel was mostly in captivity in Babylon and Jerusalem was in ruins.

Original Readers / Occasion

The nation was in shock and despair over the devastation of their religious and political capital; many were wondering why this had happened and what the future held. An expression of grief was appropriate and a confession of responsibility was needed. For those in the captivity Lamentations provided a form for both, along with a restatement of the reasons for the destruction.

Special Issues

Structure and Literary Genre. Lamentations is composed of five distinct poems, four of which are acrostics, that is each successive line or verse begins with a

³ Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *The Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 646.

letter of the alphabet in order. The first three poems (chapters 1—3) each have three lines to a stanza, there being twenty-two stanzas for the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The fourth poem (ch. 4) has two lines per stanza and the fifth only one line per stanza. In poems one, two, and four only the first line of each stanza begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. In poem three all three lines of each stanza begin with its respective letter of the alphabet. The fifth poem (ch. 5) is not an acrostic at all and each stanza has only one line. This macro-structural feature has two effects. First, it serves to emphasize the third chapter, which is indeed different in content and tone. Second, this feature gives the book a “dying away” or “dying out” feeling.⁴ Another feature of the poetry of Lamentations is that it exhibits a 3:2 meter as opposed to the much more common 3:3 meter of Hebrew poetry. This means that the second colon of the parallel line is shorter than the first. This “unbalanced meter has often been described as a kind of ‘limping’ rhythm, supposedly appropriate for the mourners who are dragging themselves along in a funeral procession.”⁵ Taken together with the content this structure makes Lamentations a lament or funeral dirge.

Message

Having reaped the full and bitter consequences of her sin, Jerusalem is bemoaned for her acute misery and pain by Jeremiah, yet with the confidence that the Lord’s mercy and compassion is still available as their hope for restoration.

⁴ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 246.

⁵ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 309. See also Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 246-47.

Outline

- I. First Dirge: Jerusalem mourns her lonely desolation and lack of a comforter. 1:1–22
 - A. Jerusalem is lamented for her utter desolation brought on by sin. 1:1–11
 - B. Jerusalem laments her mournful destitution and pleas for someone to take notice of her need for comfort and her desire for vengeance. 1:12–22
 - 1. She sorrowfully laments her isolated destitution. 1:12–16
 - 2. She laments the demise and absence of those who could bring her comfort. 1:17–19
 - 3. She pleads with Yahweh for retribution on those who had caused her such trouble. 1:20–22
- II. Second Dirge: Jerusalem is lamented as the object of God’s righteous wrath. 2:1–22
 - A. Jerusalem’s destruction was caused by a outpouring of the Lord’s anger. 2:1–10
 - B. Jerusalem’s resulting condition was one that produced cries of anguish by those who saw it. 2:11–17
 - C. Jerusalem is directed to appeal directly to the Lord who had judged them. 2:18–22
- III. Third Dirge: Jerusalem is encouraged to find hope in Yahweh’s compassion and mercies. 3:1–66
 - A. Jeremiah laments the treatment that he had received as a result of his association with Jerusalem. 3:1–20
 - B. Jeremiah looks to Yahweh’s mercies and compassion to find hope even in the midst of affliction. 3:21–39
 - C. Jeremiah leads Jerusalem to Yahweh in confession and petition for deliverance from fear. 3:40–44
- IV. Fourth Dirge: Jerusalem is confronted with the effects of her demise. 4:1–22
 - A. Jerusalem had fallen into a condition of squalor and cruelty internally. 4:1–11
 - B. Jerusalem had devalued the reputation of the Lord internationally. 4:12–22
- V. Fifth Dirge: Jerusalem prays for restoration as Yahweh’s favored people. 5:1–22
 - A. Jerusalem prays that Yahweh would look on their reproach and remember them. 5:1–18
 - B. Jerusalem prays that Yahweh would restore them to a condition of blessing. 5:19–22

Argument

The five poems making up the funeral dirge of Lamentations are distinct yet not disjointed. Taken together they flow from anguish, through confession and trust, and

finally unto petition. Jeremiah alternately expresses the grief and pain of the nation, and his own sorrowful affliction as he serves once again in the capacity of God's agent of encouragement to His covenant people on earth.

I. First Dirge: Jerusalem mourns her lonely desolation and lack of a comforter (1:1–22).

In this opening lament, the speaker expresses the extreme loneliness of the desolate city Jerusalem in the aftermath of destruction. She has no one to comfort her (1:2, 9) and is completely incapacitated before her enemies, all because of her own grievous sin (1:5, 8). It is Yahweh who has inflicted her in this way (1:12–15) and she was fully deserving of His judgment (1:18–20). Apparently without hope for immediate restoration, the best that Israel can do is pray for retribution on her wicked persecutors (1:21–22).

II. Second Dirge: Jerusalem is lamented as the object of God's righteous wrath (2:1–22).

The second poem advances the effective cause of Jerusalem's present plight, which was not the nations that she had just imprecated, but rather the Lord Himself. Over and over in this chapter the Lord's anger is referred to as the precipitating cause of Jerusalem's defeat and devastation (2:1–10). So terrible was His action against her that the neighboring nations marvel He would do such a thing (2:11–17). The day of the Lord had accomplished its awful work of retribution in terrible completeness (2:20–22). However, Yahweh was still available to them if they would but cry out to Him (2:19).

III. Third Dirge: Jerusalem is encouraged to find hope in Yahweh's compassion and mercies (3:1–66).

This chapter is actually the same length as chapters one and two, yet it is different in that each line of the three line stanzas begins with its successive letter of the

alphabet. It is also different in content in that in this emphasized center (3:21–39) Jeremiah is able to exult in the goodness of God despite his present affliction. As a man in the midst of undeserved suffering he had experienced the same temporal effects of the sinful nation (3:1–20). Hence, he is able to identify with their pain. However, in the midst of his soul's bitterness (3:19–20) he is able to recollect Yahweh's merciful and compassionate nature and place hope in Him (3:21–24). Since the Lord is good to those who call on Him, the prophet is able to sit quietly under His yoke knowing that the affliction is but temporary (3:25–32). Since God never manifests His wrath in a hasty or capricious manner the recipient of such a lot is never justified in complaining, especially when he is being disciplined for his sins (3:33–39). Jeremiah had been practicing this perspective for decades. It was now time for Israel to adopt and practice it as well. On this basis Jeremiah exhorts the nation to undertake a self-examination and turn back to Yahweh (3:40). His own experience had been that Yahweh could be called upon during times of apparent rejection so that fears could be overcome and enemies defeated (3:43–66). Whatever had been Israel's past, the remnant that remained could hope in the Lord just as Jeremiah had exemplified.

IV. Fourth Dirge: Jerusalem is confronted with the effects of her demise (4:1–22).

Returning to the effects of Yahweh's judgment Israel is faced with the awful effects of her judgment. First, she had fallen into a condition of squalor and cruelty that would have been thought impossible (4:1–11). Such were the effects of unrepentant sin and the judgment that necessarily follows. If that were not enough, Israel had also brought disrepute on her Lord because she had forced Him to make a spectacle of her before the rest of the nations (4:12–22). It would be some consolation that the day of the

Lord would also result in the judgment of those who had abused her, but only some (4:21–22).

V. Fifth Dirge: Jerusalem prays for restoration as Yahweh's favored people (5:1–22).

Jeremiah prays as a representative of the nation, calling on the Lord to take notice of what had happened to Israel (5:1–18). He prays this not because Yahweh had somehow become unaware of their situation, but because he knew that the Lord's compassion never fails and that His plan for the covenant people had yet to be fulfilled. It was, therefore, a prayer of faith based on knowledge of the promises to and expressed will of God for the nation (5:19–22).

Conclusion

When God is forced to discipline His own it is never pleasant, to experience or to behold. However, even in the most severe affliction there is hope. Consequences may have to be born and disgrace may have to be endured, yet because Yahweh's compassions are new every morning and because His faithfulness is truly great, the believer can say "Yahweh is my portion . . . therefore I hope in Him!" (3:23–24).

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