LAMENTATIONS

# TITLE

“Lamentations” was derived from a translation of the title used by the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek Old Testament and conveys the idea of “loud cries.” The Hebrew exclamation **ekah** (“How” – expressing dismay) used in *1:1, 2:1* and *4:1* gives the book its Hebrew title. However the rabbis began early to call the book “loud cries” or “lamentations” *(cf. Jeremiah 7:29).* No other Old Testament book contains only laments, as does Lamentations, marking the funeral of the once beautiful city of Jerusalem *(cf. 2:15).* The book keeps alive the memory of that fall.

# CONTENT

A series of five laments over the fall of Jerusalem.

# AUTHOR AND DATE

The author is not named within the book, but there are internal and historical indications that it was Jeremiah. The Septuagint introduces *Lamentations 1:1* “And it came to pass, after Israel had been carried away captive … Jeremiah sat weeping … lamented … and said …” God had told Jeremiah to have Judah lament *(Jeremiah 7:29)* and Jeremiah also wrote laments for Josiah

*(2 Chronicles 35:25).*

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations as an eyewitness *(1:13–15; 2:6,9; 4:1- 12)* possibly with Baruch’s secretarial help *(cf. Jeremiah 36:4; 45:1)* during or soon after Jerusalem’s fall in 586BC. It was mid July when the city fell and mid August when the temple was burned. Jeremiah likely saw the destruction of walls, towers, homes, palace, and temple. He wrote while the event remained painfully fresh in his memory, but before his forced departure to Egypt c. 583BC *(Jeremiah 43:1-7).* The language used in lamentations closely resembles that used by Jeremiah in his much larger prophetic book *(cf. 1:2* with *Jeremiah 30:14; 1:5* with *Jeremiah 8:21; 1:6* and *2:11* with *Jeremiah* 6:25, 4:21 with *Jeremiah 49:12*).

# BACKGROUND AND SETTING

The prophetic seeds of Jerusalem’s destruction were sown through Joshua 800 years in advance *(Joshua 23:15,16).* Now, for over 40 years, Jeremiah had prophesied of coming judgement and been scorned by the people for preaching doom (c. 645 – 605BC). When that judgement came on the disbelieving people from Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army, Jeremiah still responded with great sorrow and compassion toward his suffering and obstinate people. Lamentations relates closely to the book of Jeremiah, describing the anguish over Jerusalem receiving God’s judgement for unrepentant sins. In the book that bears his name, Jeremiah had predicted the calamity in *chapters 1 – 29.* In Lamentations, he concentrates in more detail on the bitter suffering and heartbreak that was felt over Jerusalem’s devastation *(cf. Psalm 46:4,5).* So critical was Jerusalem’s destruction that the facts are recorded in four separate Old Testament chapters: *2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 39:1-11; 52;* and *2 Chronicles 36:11-21.*

Along with Ruth, Esther, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes, Lamentations is included among the Old Testament books of the Megilloth, or ‘five scrolls,’ which were read in the synagogue every year. Lamentations is read on the ninth day of Ab (July/August) to remember the date of Jerusalem’s destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. This same date later marked the destruction of Herod’s temple by the Romans in 70AD.

# EMPHASES

The deep personal suffering and spiritual agony experienced at the fall of Jerusalem; the justice of God in carrying out the overthrow of Zion; hope lies finally in God’s character alone.

**OVERVIEW**

Lamentations consists of five laments, written in response to the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC. The laments, which correspond to the five chapters, are carefully composed pieces of literature, similar in form and content to *Psalms 74* and *79 (cf. Psalm 89).* Together they express deep anguish over Zion’s desolation and Israel’s exile – recognised to be well deserved – and mourn the sorry plight of those who were left in the now desolate and dangerous city, while raising some larger questions about justice and the future. The book is written basically from the perspective of those who have been left behind.

At least three voices can be identified: the narrator/author, Zion (personified Jerusalem) and the people of Zion. Yahweh Himself never speaks. In the first two closely related poems, the narrator and Zion are the speakers. They mourn over the fall of the city itself, recognising that it happened because of her sins, so that Yahweh Himself had become her enemy. In the final two, again, closely related poems, the speakers are the narrator and the people of Zion, who agonized for the people in occupied Jerusalem. In the central poem in *chapter 3*, Jerusalem is personified. The only identifiable speaker is the author, whose personal agony is so closely tied to that of Jerusalem that in various ways they become one. Here also is the single expression hope as well as a brief discussion of the meaning of suffering.

**UNDERSTANDING LAMENTATIONS**

The most striking literary feature of these poems is that they are a series of acrostics *(cf. Psalms 34* and *119),* where the first letter of each verse starts with a succeeding letter of the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet. The first two poems therefore have 22 stanzas of 3 lines each, the first line in each case being the acrostic. The third poem also has 22 stanzas, but in this case, all 3 lines in each stanza begin with the same letter. The fourth stanza returns to the form of the first two, but now with stanzas of 2 lines each, while the fifth, although not an acrostic, is nonetheless composed of 22 lines. Thus the pattern builds to the agonizing climactic descriptions of *chapter 3,* then diminishes in *chapter 4,* and ends quietly in *chapter 5,* a pattern that mirrors the city’s destruction and its aftermath. While not all these features can be carried over into English, the acrostic pattern does affect the verse numbering *(22,22,66,22,22),* and to some degree explains why these poems contain some abrupt shifts of topic. Obviously the alphabet controls what may be said at any point. But throughout the whole, the lament form itself implicitly encourages hope – though nothing is guaranteed – in the midst of suffering. This acrostic form would not only have aided memorisation, but acted as a symbol of the fullness of the peoples’ grief (ie. from A to Z).

But beyond that there was the larger question of Israel’s calling and role as the people of God. Here was a people whose history was singularly bound up with the God who had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, created them as a people for His Name, made covenant with them at Sinai, and eventually fulfilled His promise that Abraham’s offspring would inherit the land. At the heart of their self-understanding was the fact that their God, who was God alone, the living God, the Creator of all that is, had chosen to dwell personally in their midst, first in the tabernacle in the wilderness, and finally in the place He chose “as a dwelling for His Name” *(Deuteronomy 12:11; Nehemiah 1:9),* Jerusalem itself. Thus both the land and the city held significance for Israel in terms of identity unlike most other people in history. Indeed, because of this, many wrongly thought Zion inviolable *(cf. Jeremiah 7; 26; 28; Ezekiel 13,14)*. It is this total identification of the people with their city as God’s own dwelling place that lies behind the utter anguish of these poems and that makes the appeals over the present plight of her people so poignant. And even though the author is fully aware that their punishment is just, his agonized descriptions indicate how hard it was to handle the reality and enormity of the desolation and suffering *(2:20-22)*

At the same time, however, the author wrestles with the issues also raised by Habakkuk and Obadiah and others. What about Israel’s enemies, who were equally deserving of God’s anger? This is what lies behind the frequent imprecations *(1:21,22; 3:61-66; 4:21,22).* And in the end, even though Moses and the prophets foretold such disaster as a result of unfaithfulness to the covenant, Jeremiah struggles with this right up to the last words, where the promised future is only a distant shadow. But in the crucial central poem he also holds out the one all important ray of hope – the character of Yahweh Himself, who has revealed Himself to Moses on Sinai as full of love and faithfulness *(Exodus 34:5-7).*

*These notes have drawn heavily on “How to Read the Bible Book by Book” by G. Fee and D. Stuart (Zondervan 2002, pp.166-168) and to a lesser extent*

* “*The MacArthur Bible Handbook” by J. MacArthur (Thomas Nelson Publishers 2003, pp.201-205)*
* *“Jensen’s Survey of the Old Testament” by I.L. Jensen (Moody Bible Institute 1978, pp.351-357)*

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**LAMENTATIONS**

**1:1 – 22 First Lamentation: Zion Laments over her Destruction**

In the first part of this poem, (vs.1-11b), the narrator sets out the matters that will be repeated throughout: Zion and her temple have been laid waste, her people taken into exile; during the siege her friends deserted her, while her enemies mocked and her foes are now her masters. Those who remain, both priests and people, are in dire straits, the pilgrimage feasts a thing of the past; for them there is only weeping and groaning. All of this is because of Judah’s many sins.

Toward the end of this first part, Zion herself calls out to Yahweh to look on her affliction (v.9c), which is then repeated at the beginning of her own lament (vs.11c-22). Calling out to “any who pass by” (v.12), she repeats (in substance) the matters from verses 1-11, but now in more detail and with increased pain and distress, concluding with an imprecation against her enemies (vs.21,22). Her lament is momentarily relieved halfway through by the poet’s own voice (v.17).

**2:1 – 22 Second Lament: Zion’s Lament and Appeal**

With still further intensification, the poet speaks again, detailing the ultimate cause of Jerusalem’s destruction – Yahweh’s anger. The Divine Warrior, who in the past had fought *for* Israel, had now become their enemy – city, land, leaders, and people alike (vs.1-9). The poet then concentrates on those left behind (vs.10-17). He speaks in the first person (vs.11,13), and finally calls on Zion herself to call out to Yahweh (vs.18,19), which she does in the poignant words of verses 20-22, reminding Yahweh of both the famine and the subsequent slaughter (of priest and prophet, young and old together).

**3:1 – 66 Third Lament: Despair, Hope and Imprecation**

In this third poem, the author makes Jerusalem’s despair his own and vice-versa (vs.1-18, already alluded to in 2:11). What seems to be at issue here is that the fall of Jerusalem meant the suffering of many who were faithful to Yahweh and innocent of her corporate crimes, but who yet felt relentlessly pursued by Yahweh. In the end his only hope is in the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh, whose love and faithfulness (echoing the words of Exodus 34:6) are new every morning (vs.19-24). These are then followed by a kind of personal dialogue about the meaning of suffering and its relationship to Yahweh, concluding with a call to repentance (vs.25-42). At the end, the lament is renewed (vs.43-51), focusing finally on his enemies who are responsible for his suffering (vs.52-62) and concluding with an imprecation against them (vs.63-66).

**4:1 – 22 Fourth Lament: Groping in the Streets**

With this fourth lament the author turns his attention to the present terrible conditions in Jerusalem, comparing them with the years of the siege and offering his belief that the dead are the fortunate ones (vs.1-11). He then focuses on the plight – and guilt – of the prophets and priests (vs.12-16). Note that verse 17 begins the lament of the people themselves, in this case looking back to the last bitter days of the siege (including the flight and capture of the king: Jeremiah 52:7-11), while the author himself concludes with an imprecation against Edom (Lamentations 4:21,22)

**5:1 – 22 Fifth Lament: The Remnant of Zion Weeps**

In this final poem, only the people speak, calling out to Yahweh to look on their present affliction, reflecting that occupied Judah is an unhappy and dangerous place in which to live (vs.1-18). The poem and book then conclude with a prayer for restoration, beginning with an affirmation of Yahweh’s eternal reign, but with characteristically lament fashion, with whether they have been forgotten (vs.19-22)

*These notes are a full summary of “How to Read the Bible Book by Book” by G. Fee and D. Stuart (Zondervan 2002, pp.168-170)*

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