

Lamentations

The Authorship and Dating

Although Lamentations doesn't specify its author, external evidence identifies Jeremiah as penman. First, the LXX as well as the Latin Vulgate have introductions noting Jeremiah as the author. Second, Jewish tradition also identifies Jeremiah as the author. Some, however, question this external evidence.¹ Those who argue against Jeremiah's authorship usually do so along three lines.² However, evidence doesn't outweigh the long history of those who lived much closer to the event.

First hand evidence including both emotional and descriptive material provides solid indicators that this book was written during the fall of Jerusalem under the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. Lamentations secures the emotional impact of that day. Since, Jeremiah was taken captive only a few short years after the destruction (583-582 B.C.) it seems most probably that the letter was written from Jerusalem sometime between 586 and 582 B.C.³

The Recipients

Given Jeremiah's record of Jerusalem's sorrows and his encouragement toward repentance (2:18-22), it is concluded that Jeremiah wrote to the occupants of Jerusalem immediately following the devastation of Jerusalem.

The Purpose

Lamentations describes the total destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. With great emotion and description Jeremiah records the spiritual sinfulness of the previous glorious city. The sharp descriptions of sin and judgment (1-2) coupled with Jeremiah's confidence in Israel's covenant God (3-5) serves to indicate that Lamentations was written to encourage Jerusalem to not only confess their sins but to also place humble trust in their covenant keeping God.

The Message

Lamentations is a highly structured poetic Hebrew book! There are five chapters in Lamentations each representing a distinctive poem. Verse indicators tell us that there are 22 verses in chapters 1, 2, 4, 5 while chapter 3 has 66. However, an understanding of Hebrew poetry helps clarify Lamentation's structure even further.

It is to be noted, that the first four chapters are written in acrostic form following the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet. So the chapter begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet... "aleph" (א) followed by the second letter... "bet" (ב) and so forth as the chapter progresses. In

¹ Bill T. & Bryan T. Beyer Arnold, *Encountering the Old Testament*(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). 403.

² "Arguments against Jeremiah's authorship usually follow these lines: (1) Would Jeremiah have led in lamentation rather than call the survivors to repentance and pointing to God's new day? (2) Can one attribute to Jeremiah passages that speak of the failure of the prophetic vision (2:9) or seem to imply policies that Jeremiah opposed (4:12, 17)? (3) Do the variations in poetic style and in the alphabetic order of the acrostic poems suggest multiple rather than single authorship?" David Allan Hubbard William Sanford LaSor, Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey the Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, Second ed.(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996). 527.

³ Charles Dyer & Eugene Merrill, *Nelson's Old Testament Survey*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll & Roy B. Zuck(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001). 646.

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chapter three, however, this acrostic is multiplied. In the first three lines every first word begins with “aleph” (א) and followed by the next three lines with “bet” (ב) and so forth.

The second thing to know about Lamentations structure is that Hebrew Poetry is written in Stanza's. In each of the 22 stanzas written in chapters 1, 2 and 3 there are three poetic lines and thus similar lengths (although the verse numbering is different in chapter 3 the poetic lines are identical with chapters 1 and 2). While chapters 1-3 have 3 poetic lines in each of the 22 stanzas, chapter 4 is shorter having only 2 poetic lines per stanza. Although chapter four maintains an acrostic pattern, the shortened lines creates a “dying out” effect for the book.⁴ Like the preceding poems the chapter 5 has 22 stanzas. However, each stanza contains only 1 poetic line and that without any acrostic unity.

In the first chapter Jeremiah characterizes Jerusalem as a widow who had suffered intense abuse and rejection from secret lovers (1:1, 2, 8, 15, 17, 19). Jeremiah then recognizes that due to Israel's sin their covenant God had removed his protective hand allowing total destruction upon the city (2:1-22). After identifying with Israel's judgment (3:1-18), Jeremiah recalls the Lord's covenant mercy (3:21-23, 31, 32) to not only deliver the humble but to also bring judgment upon the disobedient (3:33-66). In the fourth chapter Jeremiah mourns the great loss of Jerusalem and then turns to give a stern warning of coming judgment upon their assailants (4:1-22). Jeremiah closes his lament with a humble prayer that the Lord will restore his fallen city (5:1-22).

The Theme

A Lament over Jerusalem's Judgment for spiritual harlotry

⁴ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament a Commentary on Genesis-Malachi*(Grand Raids: Baker Academic, 1999). 247.

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Outline

- I. The Despair of Jerusalem 1:1-22**
 - A. Jerusalem's Despair Described 1:1-11
 - B. Jerusalem's Despair Personified 1:12-22

- II. The Lord's Judgment Within the City 2:1-22**
 - A. The Lord's Judgment of the City 2:1-9
 - B. The Lord's Judgment of the Weak 2:10-14
 - C. The Prophet's Call to Repentance 2:15-22

- III. The Prophet's Resolve 3:1-66**
 - A. The Prophet's Testimony 3:1-20
 - B. The Prophet's Hope 3:21-41
 - C. The Prophet's Sorrow 3:42-54
 - D. The Prophet's Prayer 3:55-66

- IV. Jerusalem's Siege 4:1-22**
 - A. Jerusalem's Lack of Food 4:1-12
 - B. Jerusalem's Lack of Leadership 4:13-20
 - C. The Coming Judgment of Edom 4:21-22

- V. The Prayer of Jerusalem 5:1-22**
 - A. Jerusalem's Servitude 5:1-16
 - B. Prophet's Prayer to Wrathful God 5:17-22

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Questions Concerning Lamentations

1. Describe the setting and authorship of Lamentations.
2. Describe the overriding literary structure of Lamentations.
3. Describe the intended reader and purpose of Lamentations.
4. Describe the background and implications of the statement in 1:2.
5. What purpose did the Lord fulfill in 2:17?
6. Describe the hope which the prophet expressed in 3:21-41.
7. Describe how Jerusalem's sin and judgment were worse than that of Sodom as mentioned in chapter 4.
8. List at least five pointed descriptions concerning everyday life in Jerusalem during the siege.
9. Describe the sins of the prophets and priests in 4:13.
10. Why is the significance of Edom's Judgment 4:21-22?

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Bibliography

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