

Introduction to Lamentations

I. **Authorship**

- A. Though the book itself does not name its author, the consensus of Jewish tradition attributed it to Jeremiah.
- B. In Hebrew the book is anonymous. A superscription to this book in the Septuagint and Vulgate reads in part, "Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem." Also, there are many similarities between Lamentations and Jeremiah (e.g., the phrase "daughter of" occurs about 20 times in each book). Furthermore, Jeremiah is connected with this type of literature in 2 Chronicles 35:25: "And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah: and all the singing men and the singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations to this day, and made them an ordinance in Israel: and, behold, they are written in the lamentations."

II. **Date**

- A. The historical setting for all five Lamentations is the years immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem (586-560 B.C.). The lack of hope in the book points to completion before 562 B.C., when the release of Jehoiachin from prison (2 Kings 25:27-30) must have stimulated some expectation that Jeremiah's promises would be fulfilled.
- B. Such hope as is expressed in chapter 3 is for the individual rather than the nation; elsewhere hope for the whole nation barely rises above anticipation that hostile nations will share the judgment that has befallen Zion.

III. **Purpose**

- A. Already in Zechariah 7:3, 5; 8:19, we find that the destruction of the temple on the seventh day of the fifth month (2 Kings 25:8-9) was remembered by an annual fast.
 - 1. This was transferred in the second century A.D. to the ninth day of the month and has since then commemorated the two destructions of the temple as well as the defeat of Bar Kochba's revolt in A.D. 135.
 - 2. We may be certain that this fast was observed from the beginning, almost certainly with ceremonies in the ruins of the temple (cf. Jeremiah 41:5, where pilgrimage to the temple area was a goal for devout people).
 - 3. For as far back as tradition reaches, Lamentations has been read on the ninth day of the fifth month; it is reasonable to assume that it was intended for this purpose from the beginning. Roman Catholics

- read it during the last three days of Holy Week.
- B. The Bible finds room for every element of human experience, including overwhelming human sorrow. This can come to the individual (e.g., Job) or to the nation as a whole. In such a position even the comfortable words of scripture do not always comfort. Though Jeremiah had set a limit to Babylonian rule and had promised national restoration (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 30-31), the hearts of the captives were too stunned to appreciate these promises (cf. Psalm 56:8).
 - C. The modern reader may wonder at the extremes of sorrow expressed in the book and may be puzzled that the Jews would have continued to mourn the destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. However, it is difficult for us to realize the severity of the destruction.
 - 1. The old "City of David" lies outside the present city walls. This is only partially due to the effects of the destruction by the Romans.
 - 2. The Chaldeans so broke down the Jebusite and Davidic walls and terraces that restoration was impossible; and Nehemiah had to build his wall much higher up the slope, greatly reducing the area of what had been the center of the city.
 - 3. At the return from exile, a completely new beginning was needed. Lamentations, in this sense, is a funeral dirge over an irrecoverable past.

IV. **Literary Form**

- A. The primary aspect (besides historical context) that ties Lamentations together is the acrostic structure that underlies each one. The structure of four of the five chapters is based entirely on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
 - 1. Chapters 1-2 each contain twenty-two verses, each verse having three lines (called a tricolon); the first word of each verse begins with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order. Chapter 4 is on the same pattern but has only two lines to a verse (called a bicolon).
 - 2. Chapter 3, with sixty-six verses, has three verses for each letter of the alphabet, thus reminding us of Psalm 119 (where the groups consist of eight verses each).
 - 3. Chapter 5 is not an acrostic, but it does consist of twenty-two lines. It consists of a long line, normally of five beats, dividing unevenly (3 + 2) and showing much less parallelism than normal Hebrew poetry.
- B. Various explanations have been offered for the use of such an acrostic structure. In Psalm 119 it aids the memory, but that can hardly have been the motive here.
 - 1. One likely suggestion is that such a literary usage kept a control on

- the expression of profound grief.
2. Another suggestion is that the use of the alphabet symbolizes that the completeness -- "the A to Z" -- of grief is being expressed.

V. ***Scriptural Values***

- A. Jeremiah best shows that national and personal suffering must be kept separate; for while he anticipated and justified the downfall of Jerusalem and the Davidic monarchy, he could not understand his personal suffering, which he as a righteous man should, according to popular theory, have avoided. The classic work on the suffering of the righteous is Job. Lamentations deals with national suffering.
- B. While there is no effort to minimize Judah's sin, Jeremiah is overwhelmed by the greatness of her doom. There is a clear recognition that the disaster was caused by God, not his enemies. Even the mockery of Judah's enemies was caused by God (2:17). Hence, the laments are mixed with prayer; and prayer leads to hope in a situation in which hope appears meaningless.
- C. Ultimately there are depths in God's actions that finite human beings cannot grasp. God's revelation in word and act consistently shows His justice and grace; yet there is always a residue of human experience that demands our bowing to a wisdom too high for our understanding. This finds its supreme example in the cross and in the cry of Jesus (Mark 15:34; cf. Psalm 22:1).