



# LAMENTATIONS

Survey of the Old Testament: The Writings

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## Introduction

### Name

The original Hebrew bible titles this book “How,” after the opening words of the book. The Septuagint, Talmud and English bibles base the title of the content, naming the book “Lamentations.” In the Hebrew bible, Lamentations is found with the Writings, located between Ecclesiastes and Esther. The Greek and English bibles place it amongst the prophets after Jeremiah based on the assumption that the book was written by Jeremiah.

### Date & Author

The Septuagint includes the following preface at the beginning of the book:

*And it came to pass after Israel had been taken captive and Jerusalem had been laid waste, Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lament over Jerusalem, and said...*

The original Hebrew texts, however, does not contain this preface and leaves the book technically anonymous. While scholars today are divided over the authorship, there is little reason to doubt Jeremiah’s authorship.

Whoever authored the book was clearly an eyewitness to the fall of the Jerusalem to Babylon. The detailed descriptions of the miseries as well as the personal nature of the woes indicate that the author lived through the experiences being described. This would put the date of the book within a generation of the fall of Jerusalem, which took place in 586 BC.

### Historical Background

The final siege of Jerusalem by Babylon took place in 586 BC, and took nearly two years (2 Kings 25:1, 8). The army of Babylon surrounded the city and did not allow any food or supplies to enter the city for 24 months, slowly starving the city to death. Lamentations describes scenes of mass starvation and cannibalism as the people sat under siege. Then, after the city had starved to the point where they could not offer resistance, the army of Babylon broke down the walls of the city and burned the city to the ground. The temple was destroyed and the temple implements were hauled away. The king of Babylon then executed the high priests and the general of the Judean army along with sixty other leaders. The rest of the noble class was hauled off into exile in Babylon while the lower classes became refugees, traveling to Egypt.

### Literary Style

Lamentations consists of 5 separate Hebrew poems. The poems themselves are laments. They follow similar structures to laments found in the Psalms and funeral dirges in non-biblical writings of the period. Lamentations is a deeply melancholy book, expressing tremendous grief and sadness over the destruction of the city of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon. Yet it is also highly structured and demonstrates significant literary skill.

The first four poems are structured in an acrostic format. The final poem has the same number of verses (22), however is not an acrostic. Each poem has a consistent syllable count and per line.

Chapter	Verses	Lines per	
		Verse	Acrostic
1	22	3	Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
2	22	3	Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
3	66	2	Three verses begin with the same Hebrew letter before moving to the next successive letter.
4	22	2	Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
5	22	2	No Acrostic.

## Purpose

Lamentations has been read at the Jewish holiday of *Tisha B'Av* (literally the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, with Av being the 5<sup>th</sup> month of the Jewish calendar). This holiday is a day of grieving over the destruction of the temple. After the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, there is evidence that people would gather annually in Jerusalem on the anniversary of the destruction of the temple to publicly and communally grieve over the fall (Zechariah 7:3, 8, 8:19). The holiday was refreshed after the destruction of the second temple in AD 70. Today the holiday continues to be a day of fasting where many tragedies of the Jewish people are commemorated, from the destruction of the temple to the holocaust.

Central to this holiday has been the reading of Lamentations. As far back as the record of the holiday go, the book of Lamentations has been associated with the commemoration of Tisha B'Av. Many scholars, therefore, believe that these poems were originally written specifically for this annual occasion<sup>1</sup>.

## Structure

The third poem represents the literary climax of the book. This central poem comprises nearly half of the entire book. Furthermore, its message of hope in God's faithfulness in the mist of Jerusalem's distress represents the overall the book.

The Cause of Jerusalem's Destruction	The All Consuming Wrath of Yahweh	Hope in the midst of misery	Atrocities Recounted	An Appeal to the Lord
1	2	3	4	5

## Theme

The theme of the book is found in this central poem, in 3:22-24:

*Yahweh's lovingkindness indeed never cease  
For His compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness  
"Yahweh is my portion," says my soul,  
"Therefore I have hope in Him.*

<sup>1</sup> H.L. Ellison. "Lamentations." *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1988).

## The Five Laments

### The Cause of Jerusalem's Destruction (Chapter 1)

#### Comparison to the Glory Days of Jerusalem (1:1-7)

The first poem of Lamentations is predominately a description of the state of Jerusalem after its fall. It begins with a contrast between the current state of Jerusalem in contrast to its glory days (1:1-6). Note the three primary contrasts in verse 1:

- Loneliness vs. a city full of people.
- A Widow vs. being great among the nations.
- A Princess vs. a forced laborer.

#### Destruction caused by Jerusalem's Sin (1:8-19)

The poet understands the cause of Jerusalem's fall from majesty is a result of her sin. She is compared to an impetuous youth who lives for the moment without regard to the long term ramifications of her sin (1:9). But the consequences have now caught up to her, and the fall is the "yoke of my transgressions" (1:14). Yahweh's righteousness requires that the rebellion of the city not go unpunished (1:18). As a result, the Lord has rejected and crushed Jerusalem (1:15).

#### Call for God to Punish the Agent of His Punishment (1:20-22)

However, the agent of the Lord's punishment causes great distress for the author. As Babylon entered the city to destroy her, the enemy also destroyed the temple of Yahweh. God himself had forbid foreigners from entering the holy temple (1:10), and yet now he was "allowing" them to not only enter but to destroy his holy place. While the poet acknowledges that Jerusalem deserved to be punished (1:20), the sin of those whom he used as the agent of that punishment was far greater and also needed to be punished (1:22). Therefore the poet calls on God to bring about the destruction of Babylon (1:21).

### The All Consuming Wrath of Yahweh (Chapter 2)

#### The Wrath of Yahweh (2:1-10)

The poet attributes this great calamity solely upon the Lord. Babylon may be the agent, but God is the ultimate cause. It is his fierce anger and wrath that has consumed the city in a consuming fire (2:3). His wrath is thorough and he has not spared anyone from his anger (2:2). His anger has consumed the princes (2:2), the beautiful (2:4), and the priest (2:6). His wrath has even consumed His own tabernacle (2:6), His altar and His sanctuary (2:7). Jerusalem has been destroyed not because of the power of Babylon, but because the righteous anger of God. Yahweh has done what he wanted to do (2:17).

#### Destruction of the Prophets (2:9, 14)

The poet gives particular attention to the destruction of the prophets. Prior to the destruction of the city, the prophets were giving false hope to the people (2:14). They predicted that the exile which had begun prior to the siege of Jerusalem and soon all those previously carried off would return (2:14, Jeremiah 28). But now the prophets have been silenced (2:9b).

#### God's Anger Spares No One (2:11-22)

God's anger is very thorough, not sparing anyone. Yet this is what brings the greatest sorrow to the poet (2:11). Even the innocent have suffered through this great destruction. It is the young child who has starved to death (2:11b-12a, 19). Such misery is beyond compare (2:13). God's punishment

has affected innocent children, righteous priests and prophets (2:20), young and old (2:21). No one was spared from the destruction (2:22). Jerusalem may have deserved it, but it is the suffering of the righteous and the innocent which causes the poet the most suffering.

## Hope in the Midst of Grief (Chapter 3)

### The Poet's Despair (3:1-18)

As the poet ponders the wholesale destruction and the suffering of even those who did not deserve it, he falls into great despair (3:1). He wastes away, becoming as a dead corpse (3:4). The poet has forgotten what happiness is like (3:17). All his strength is gone as is His hope in Yahweh (3:18).

### The Poet's Hope (3:19-38)

And yet, the poet remembers and recalls, and so there remains a glimmer of hope (3:19-20). What is it that the poet remembers? The faithful love of God. His love endures forever, his compassion never fails, his faithfulness is great (3:22-23). Therefore as long as he sticks with God, there is hope (3:24). Yahweh is good to those who wait for Him, saving those who seek him (3:25-26). Yes, God has caused great sorrow to even the righteous (3:32), but it will not last forever (3:31). Salvation is on the way.

### An Appeal to God's Justice (3:55-66)

The poet has called the Lord's attention to the injustice of the situation. In the midst of the pouring out of his wrath, the innocent have suffered and the wicked have seen a great victory. But God has heard the cry of the innocent and he will redeem them (3:58). Furthermore, God will bring vengeance upon those who have brought about this destruction (3:62, 64, 66).

## Atrocities Recounted (Chapter 4)

### Atrocities Caused by Hunger (4:1-10)

Towards the end of the siege of Jerusalem, hunger was rampant among the people. Even the rich and noble classes were reduced to nothing by hunger (4:5). At this point, gold and precious stones were worthless because you can not eat gold (4:1). Food was the only thing of value.

Such hunger causes people to do terrible things. Mothers became so hungry that they would deprive their own children of food so they could eat themselves (4:3-4). More terribly, such hunger led to cannibalism as mothers boiled their own children (4:11).

Such atrocities were so great that the poet considered this punishment from God worse than what was inflicted upon Sodom (4:6). Sodom was destroyed in a quick flash of fire and brimstone from heaven. But Jerusalem was destroyed after a slow painful death (4:9).

### The Presence of the Lord Removed (4:11-16)

The conventional wisdom of the time believed that Jerusalem could never be overthrown (4:12). Jerusalem was home to the temple of Yahweh. The God of heaven dwelt in the temple, making his very presence known in Zion. However, the priest and prophets of Yahweh were so corrupt and wicked that they were considered unclean (4:13-15). As a result, the presence of the Lord could no longer remain with them (4:16). With the departure of the Lord's presence, Jerusalem was now able to be overthrown, and the temple of Zion, God's holy place, destroyed.

### Destruction of Refugees and Punishment for Edom (4:17-22)

The poet describes one final atrocity. The final destruction created a stream of refugees from Judah looking for safety. As the refugees fled, the surrounding nations refused to help (4:17). In particular, Edom, the longtime vassal of Judah, not only refused to help, but pursued the refugees

into the mountains where they ambushed them (4:19). The poet tells Edom to “laugh it up” now (4:21), for God eventually would bring punishment to them for this atrocity (4:22)

## An Appeal to Yahweh (Chapter 5)

### The Punishment Recounted (5:1-18)

The poet calls on Yahweh to remember the great punishment that He has inflicted upon them (5:1). They’ve lost the inheritance of the Promised Land (5:2). They’ve become widows and orphans (5:3). The basic necessities of life can no longer be afforded (5:4). The people have faced hunger (5:10), the women raped (5:11), the men tortured (5:12) and placed into forced slavery (5:13). There is no joy and no music left with the people (5:15). Yes, this was all result of the sin of the nation (5:16), but by now these were the sins of their fathers and grandfathers, not their sin. Yet they were the ones being punished (5:7).

### The Request (5:19-21)

So the poet call on God to bring an end to the punishment (5:20). He begins by acknowledging the sovereignty of God (5:19). Then he asks if God plans to always forsake his people (5:20), and he requests that God would restore His people (5:21).

### The Surprise Ending (5:22)

Then in a bi-polar fashion, the poet ponders that maybe God will not restore them. The hope of chapter 3 and the appeal of chapter 5 are rejected for a depressing possibility as the book ends. Maybe God is so exceedingly angry that God has rejected them forever. This seems to end the book on such a negative note. However, one must remember that the message of the book is found in chapter 3, not in chapter 5. God’s anger is not forever. He has not utterly rejected them. His lovingkindness is forever. His compassion never fails. Great is His faithfulness.

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