

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Lamentations

Most of us have not experienced the death of our nation, and we know little of the agony of utter despair; but others in our world have experienced total devastation as their cities or nations have been destroyed by wars, earthquakes, tsunamis, or hurricanes. Reading the book of Lamentations can give us a point of entry into their experiences. It can help us to face the darkest aspects of human existence.

Setting

After a long siege, the Babylonian army breached Jerusalem's defenses and took control. They deported many of the people of Judah to exile in Babylon, and they destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the Temple of God. Only a few survivors remained in the land, including Jeremiah the prophet. Nothing else was left, and the hopes of God's people were nearly dead.

Summary

The book of Lamentations is a collection of five highly structured and emotionally powerful poems that lament Jerusalem's destruction.

[Chapter 1](#) describes Jerusalem's ruins. Jerusalem is personified as a once-famous princess who is now a wounded slave, lamenting the contrast between her past and present with intense agony and shame. She acknowledges that she has earned her distress, and she prays that the Lord will relieve her miserable condition.

[Chapter 2](#) summarizes the shameful situation in Jerusalem. The author agonizes as he watches starving children, weeping mothers, lying prophets, and mocking enemies. This tragedy happened because God withdrew his mercy and kept his promise to judge his people when they sinned against him.

[Chapter 3](#) is an eyewitness account of God's wrath. The author is sickened by the carnage; he is without hope and crushed by shame. Then he realizes that God's anger will not last forever, and hope floods his soul. God's faithfulness, love, kindness, and goodness are the ultimate, saving reality. Yet the hurt remains, and tears flow abundantly as he prays.

[Chapter 4](#) is a gloomy description of the devastation before and after the walls of Jerusalem were breached, in contrast to the city's years of glory. God was justly punishing the vicious sins of his people, and they could not escape his judgment.

[Chapter 5](#) is a prayer that asks God to carefully consider the people's plight. It ends with a plea for salvation, if salvation is still available.

The first four of these poems are acrostics based on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, with each successive stanza beginning with the next letter (a feature that is lost in translation). [Chapter 5](#) has twenty-two verses but is not an acrostic. In all five poems, pain and distress are paired with faith and hope. The suffering of the present seems more real than the possibility of redemption in the future, but God's love and faithfulness remain.

Authorship

The book of Lamentations does not identify its author. The poems are situated in a context immediately before and after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Jeremiah was in Jerusalem during this time of calamity, and he has long been identified as the author. It may have been written with the help of Baruch, Jeremiah's assistant and scribe. Second Chronicles indicates that Jeremiah also wrote laments at the time of King Josiah's death ([2 Chr 35:25](#)). The author of Lamentations freely pours out his emotions, as does Jeremiah in the book that bears his name, and both books reflect on the future of the nation.

There are a number of other parallels between the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations. Compare the treatment of the following themes: troubled widows ([1:1](#); [5:3](#); cp. [Jer 15:8](#); [18:21](#)); weeping people ([1:2](#), [16](#); [2:18](#); [3:48-49](#); cp. [Jer 4:8](#); [6:26](#); [9:1](#); [13:17](#); [14:17](#); [25:34](#)); sin ([1:5](#), [10](#), [18](#), [22](#); [3:42](#); [4:13-14](#); [5:7](#); cp. [Jer 2:34](#); [4:17](#); [14:20](#); [30:14-16](#); [31:29](#); [51:51](#)); punishment ([2:2-22](#); [3:39](#); [5:14-16](#); cp. [Jer 6:11](#), [25](#); [7:14](#); [16:2-4](#); [18:21](#); [51:30](#), [34](#); [52:14](#)); false prophets ([2:14](#); cp. [Jer 23:25-29](#); [29:8-9](#)); bitterness ([3:19](#); cp. [Jer 9:15](#)); pits ([3:53](#), [55](#); cp. [Jer 37:16](#); [38:6-13](#)); and clay pots ([4:2](#); cp. [Jer 19:11](#)). Although some Old Testament scholars ascribe Lamentations to a much later author, such parallels support Jeremiah's authorship.

Meaning and Message

What positive meaning can be gained from staring at fire-blackened stones or from walking among starving children and wailing mothers? How does one sort through the memories of false prophets who promised rescue from the Babylonian army encamped around Jerusalem? How does one make sense of the priests wandering the city searching for food, when those priests had previously conveyed confidence that the sacrifices they offered would provide victory and success? How can one believe in God's goodness when corpses lie everywhere?

The author of Lamentations did find meaning in the calamity. God's people had brought it on themselves through their false worship and immoral behavior. God was angry because of this rejection of his sovereignty and violation of their covenant with him. As a result, God had judged them, as he had promised to do (see [Deut 28:32–53](#)). God's punishment was righteous and just (see [Lam 1:18](#)); he does not tolerate human rebellion.

But what about the future? Those who truly seek God have hope. In the midst of utter sorrow, those in anguish can plead before God and experience his mercy, forgiveness, and restoration. Misery threatens to overwhelm the soul, but hope brings light. God is eternal, and he is sovereign over the universe. Though doubts and fears continue to assault the human spirit, God remains dependable. God's anger, which is just, is temporary. His anger ceases when confession and repentance begin, and it becomes possible to sing of God's great faithfulness ([Lam 3:21–26](#)).