

LAMENTATIONS

The Hebrews generally knew their Old Testament books by the first words in the book, and in the Book of Lamentations it begins with the Hebrew exclamation *ekah*, (1:1; 2:1; 4:1) ... and this is its Hebrew title. It is the adverb “How!” ... **1:1** *How* doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! *How* is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, *how* is she become tributary! ... **2:1** *How* hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel, and remembered not his footstool in the day of his anger! ... **4:1** *How* is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed! In its five laments, this was the expression of how Jeremiah portrayed the dismay and bewilderment, following the third wave of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections, and collectively, they are known as the *Tanakh* for they appear in this order ... Torah (the Law, which are the five books of Moses), *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (the Writings). In the *Ketuvim*, - the third and final section of the Hebrew Old Testament, - are the Three Poetic Books, which are Psalms, Proverbs, and Job. These are accompanied by what is known as the *Five Megillot* (‘scrolls’) which comprised the Song of Solomon, the Book of Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. Finally, this third section was completed with the Book of Daniel, Ezra (which contained both the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah), and Chronicles.

Gradually the rabbis came to also refer to this book as the book of the “loud cries/wails”, to which the Latin *Vulgate* renamed it ‘Lamentia’ (“lamentations”) because this was a funeral dirge for the once great and beautiful Jerusalem. Indeed, this was how Jeremiah had prophesied, **Jer. 7:29** Cut off thine hair, O Jerusalem, and cast it away, and take up a *lamentation [qiynah]* on high places; for the Lord hath rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath. ... **Lam. 2:5** The Lord was as an enemy: he hath swallowed up Israel, he hath swallowed up all her palaces: he hath destroyed his strong holds, and hath increased in the daughter of Judah mourning and *lamentation [‘aniyah]*. ... This book is a memorial for God’s people to lament the fruits of their unfaithfulness to God, especially during this period, and it further contains five separate laments.

In the first 4 chapters of Lamentations, each verse begins in an acrostic pattern, that is, it uses the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence (i.e. alef, bet, gimel, dalet, he, etc). In the Hebrew language, chapters 1, 2, and 4 have 22 verses corresponding to each of the 22 Hebrew letters. Chapter three

uses each letter for 3 consecutive verses until there are 22 trios, resulting in 66 verses. The reason it was written using acrostics was to serve as an aid towards memorization so the generations would never forget. Then, in the final chapter, - whilst in the Hebrew it simulates the pattern in that it has 22 verses, - chapter 5 is not written in an acrostic pattern like chapters 1,2, and 4.

Even today, - for it has become a tradition, - the 154 verses of the Book of Lamentations are read along with Ruth, Esther, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes in the synagogues on special occasions. Lamentations, especially, is read on the 9th of Ab (*Tisha B'Av*, July/August) to remember the date of Jerusalem's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. ... By the way, it is also the date which marks the destruction of Herod's temple by the Roman Titus in 70 AD. It is commemorated as the saddest day in the Jewish calendar for it also remembers such horrors as at the hands of the Crusaders, the numerous medieval pogroms, and up to and including the Holocaust during the Second World War.

Another interesting feature about the book of Lamentations is how it ascends to and descends from the pivotal point in 3:22–24, *great is thy faithfulness* ... which is the literal centre of the book.

It is virtually undeniable that Jeremiah was its eyewitness author, cf. 1:13–15; 2:6,9; 4:1–12, and he wrote when the destruction of the city was painfully fresh in his memory. The events occurred during or soon after Nebuchadnezzar's third wave of attack on Jerusalem in 586 BC (the previous two were in 605 BC and 597 BC), but before he (Jeremiah) was forced in to Egypt (c. 583 BC, cf. Jer. 43:1-7).

Indeed, Jerusalem's destruction was prophesied as far back as Joshua 23, **15** Therefore it shall come to pass, that as all good things are come upon you, which the LORD your God promised you; so shall the LORD bring upon you all evil things, until he have destroyed you from off this good land which the LORD your God hath given you. **16** When ye have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed yourselves to them; then shall the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which he hath given unto you. As the events were drawing closer, Jeremiah had repeatedly warned the people of Jerusalem of coming judgment but they refused to listen ... and yet, when the Babylonians *did* come, Jeremiah spoke with great sorrow and compassion towards his stubborn people ... who had brought this catastrophe upon themselves, due to

their disobedience towards God. Indeed, when the Babylonians were outside the city gates and walls, Jeremiah *begged* the leaders to surrender and thus spare the people, the city, and the temple. ... But they would not, and they denounced him as a traitor, and even threatened to kill him.

However, Jeremiah survived and continued to faithfully bring to the people the message God had given him. He was subsequently imprisoned, **Jer. 37:17** And when he was in the gate of Benjamin, a captain of the ward was there, whose name was Irijah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah; and he took Jeremiah the prophet, saying, Thou fallest away to the Chaldeans. **14** Then said Jeremiah, It is false; I fall not away to the Chaldeans. But he hearkened not to him: so Irijah took Jeremiah, and brought him to the princes. **15** Wherefore the princes were wroth with Jeremiah, and smote him, and put him in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe: for they had made that the prison. **16** When Jeremiah was entered into the dungeon, and into the cabins, and Jeremiah had remained there many days

Though the major theme of the book of Lamentations deals with God's judgment on Judah's sin and their rejection of His word, a second theme constantly emerges, - God's grace. His sovereignty over the whole proceedings, - terrible as they were, - is demonstrated by how He presented Babylon ... not as a foreign godless nation out of control ... but as His instrument of wrath. Babylon was not given 'free rein', but they were under the control and the authority of God Who was using them to chastise His people. ... Judah was His beloved, - He had not stopped loving her, but she broke His heart and shamed herself through her wilful idolatry ... God's holiness was offended.

The name of Babylon is mentioned over 150 times in the prophecy of Jeremiah, and yet it is not mentioned *once* in Lamentations. Nevertheless, the children of Israel are in Babylon, but in this prophecy only the Lord is identified as the One Who dealt with Judah's sin ... and not Babylon. ... This was God's disciplining of His people.

Consequently, much of the book is a prayer containing a strong sense of wailing, anxious confession of sin, for example, **1:11** All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their pleasant things for meat to relieve the soul: see, O LORD, and consider; for I am become vile. It does not seem as if their cries are penetrating the presence of God, for God seems to have shut them out, **3:8** Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer. And Jeremiah acknowledged God's right to be angry with His people, **3:55** I called upon thy name, O LORD, out of the low dungeon. **56** Thou hast heard my voice: hide not thine ear at my

breathing, at my cry. ⁵⁷ Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon thee: thou saidst, Fear not. ⁵⁸ O Lord, thou hast pleaded the causes of my soul; thou hast redeemed my life. ⁵⁹ O LORD, thou hast seen my wrong: judge thou my cause. ⁶⁰ Thou hast seen all their vengeance and all their imaginations against me. ⁶¹ Thou hast heard their reproach, O LORD, and all their imaginations against me; ⁶² The lips of those that rose up against me, and their device against me all the day. ⁶³ Behold their sitting down, and their rising up; I am their musick. ⁶⁴ Render unto them a recompence, O LORD, according to the work of their hands. ⁶⁵ Give them sorrow of heart, thy curse unto them. ⁶⁶ Persecute and destroy them in anger from under the heavens of the LORD. ... And all this after the appeals of the prophet to Him to show mercy based upon His grace, ^{3:22} It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. ²³ They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. ²⁴ The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.

We could then extend what we read here to relate it to the Saviour Who, like Jeremiah, also wept over Jerusalem (^{3:48} Mine eye runneth down with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. ⁴⁹ Mine eye trickleth down, and ceaseth not, without any intermission, ... Mt. 23:37-39; Lk. 19:41-44). And yet, on neither occasion had God finished with the city and its people for such was Jeremiah's hope and confidence. He recognised his people deserved the judgment they were getting, and he saw their need to repent, ^{3:40} Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD. ⁴¹ Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens ... ^{5:21} Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old. ²² But thou hast utterly rejected us; thou art very wroth against us.

This book teaches us how with our God-given privileges there comes responsibility and accountability for even though God is long-suffering, there comes a time when He must chasten His people. He removed the blessings He had granted them, - their land, their freedom, their name among the nations, their beloved temple ... He took them all away and left them with nothing.

God has always worked on the principle that He will not continue to be mocked for whatever a people sows, they will either reap the benefits of obedience or the curses of disobedience, - He made it so abundantly plain through the Law of Moses and the messages of His servants, the prophets.

And when the people ignored the warnings ... and when the unfaithful priests and prophets failed to meet His expectations, His wrath was poured out upon

them by using the King of Babylon as the rod of chastisement, **3:1** *I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath.*

Another observation is that even though Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed the word of the Lord for almost fifty years, he never saw the hearts of the people change, - they ignored him even though he was so faithful. He didn't seem to be getting anywhere with them. They kept on getting worse, and God *had* to step in! Despite Jeremiah's work for the Lord, there was no repentance in the land.

Indeed, Jeremiah was a man with a broken heart, - not a broken man, but a man with a broken heart, - he was known as the 'wailing'/'weeping' prophet. He seemed to be losing, and not getting anywhere, even though he followed the Lord. His ministry would not be considered 'successful' by today's standards, and yet he was given the privilege of being identified with Jesus, **Mt. 16:13** *When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? 14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias*

Surely, that is the only worthwhile 'success' we should be pursuing, - to be identified with Christ. That is how our Christian service will ultimately be measured ... how much we identify with our Lord, as we become conformed to His image (Rom. 8:29).

The hymn writer described it ...

Sometimes the day seems long, Our trials hard to bear.
 We're tempted to complain, to murmur and despair.
 ... [*But*] It will be worth it all when we see Jesus!
 Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ.
 One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrow will erase.
 So, bravely run the race till we see Christ.

In the midst of the surrounding darkness, 'glimmerings of light came through and Jeremiah *did* realise God *was* at work, **3:21** *This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. 22 It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. 23 They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.*

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

- I. The First Lament: Jerusalem's Devastation (1:1–22)
 - The Nation's Disgrace*
 - A. Jeremiah's Sorrow (1:1–11)
 - B. Jerusalem's Sorrow (1:12–22)

- II. The Second Lament: The Lord's Anger Explained (2:1–22)
 - The City's Destruction*
 - A. The Lord's Perspective (2:1–10)
 - B. A Human Perspective (2:11–19)
 - C. Jeremiah's Prayer (2:20–22)

- III. The Third Lament: Jeremiah's Grievs Expressed (3:1–66)
 - The Prophet's Distress*
 - A. His Distress (3:1–20)
 - B. His Hope (3:21–38)
 - C. His Counsel/Prayer (3:39–66)

- IV. The Fourth Lament: God's Wrath Detailed (4:1–22)
 - The Lord's Discipline*
 - A. For Jerusalem (4:1–20)
 - B. For Edom (4:21, 22)

- V. The Fifth Lament: The Remnant's Prayers (5:1–22)
 - The Remnant's Declaration*
 - A. To Be Remembered by the Lord (5:1–18)
 - B. To Be Restored by the Lord (5:19–22)