

NAME

The Hebrew title of the book is אֵיכָה ('eykah) meaning "How...!", the first word not only in 1:1 but also in 2:1; 4:1. Because of its subject matter, the book is also referred to in Jewish tradition as קִינָה (qinot), meaning "lamentations" (the title given to it in the LXX θρηνηοι (threnoi) meaning "lamentations" and the Latin Vulgate). The word "lamentations" means a mournful expression of grief or an audible expression of sorrow.

Mitchell:

In the LXX the book of Lamentations is introduced by the words:

And it came to pass, after Israel had been carried away captive, and Jerusalem had become desolate that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said...

Tradition has it that Jeremiah penned these words under the knoll that is now called "Golgotha." One can feel the infinite sorrow and compassion of Israel's Messiah and our Savior throbbing through the words of His prophet (c.f. Matthew 23:37). If there is a tear on every page of Jeremiah's prophecy, then there is a tear on every sentence of this lamentation of Jeremiah. Dr. J. Vernon McGee calls it, "*a paean of pain, a poem of pity, a proverb of pathos, a hymn of heartbreak, a psalm of sadness, a symphony of sorrow, a story of sifting, a tale of tears, a dirge of desolation, a tragedy of travail, an account of agony and a book of 'boo-hoo.'* It is the wailing wall of the Bible."

AUTHOR

From NASB introduction to Lamentations:

Although Lamentations is anonymous and we cannot be certain who wrote it, according to strong Jewish (Josephus et. al.) and Christian tradition Jeremiah was the author of this poetic lament. 2 Chronicles 35:25 (though the "lamentations" are not to be identified with the Old Testament book of Lamentations) connects Jeremiah with the lamentation type of literature. As well, the poetical sections of Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 7:29; 8:21; 9:1,10,20) seem to indicate a connection between authors. The similarity of vocabulary and style between the books indicates a common author. Also, since the prophet Jeremiah was an eyewitness to the divine judgment on Jerusalem in 586 B.C., it is reasonable to assume that he was the author of the book that so vividly portrays the event. Lamentations poignantly shares the overwhelming sense of loss that accompanied the destruction of the city, temple and ritual, as well as the exile of Jerusalem's inhabitants.

For more on Jeremiah see the Notes on Jeremiah - Author.

DATE

The earliest possible date for the book is 586 B.C. which reflects the period immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem. The latest date is 516 B.C. when the rebuilt Jerusalem temple was dedicated. The graphic immediacy of Lamentations argues for an earlier date, probably before 575 B.C.

Halley page 378:

The book must have been composed in the three months between the burning of Jerusalem and the departure of the remnant to Egypt (Jeremiah 39:2; 41:1,18; 43:7). During this time the seat

of government was at Mizpah (Jeremiah 40:8). Probably a number of copies were made; some were taken to Egypt, others sent to Babylon for the exiles to memorize and sing.

Many elements of the lament are borne out in the historical narrative in 2 Kings concerning the fall of Jerusalem: Jerusalem lying in ruins (Lamentations 2:2 and 2 Kings 25:9), enemies entering the city (Lamentations 4:12 and 2 Kings 24:11), people going into exile (Lamentations 1:3 and 2 Kings 24:14) and the sanctuary being plundered (Lamentations 1:10 and 2 Kings 24:13). On the other hand, Babylon is never mentioned in Lamentations, though this could simply be to make the point that the judgment comes from God, and is a consequence of Judah disobeying him.

THEME

Type of Literature: Prophecy / Poetry / Major Prophet

Halley (page 43): *"A Dirge Over the Desolation of Jerusalem"*

Mitchell: *"Trusting Through Sorrow"* - (cf. 1:8; 3:22,23)

Sin brings sorrow and Jeremiah realizes God has indeed brought the present sorrow on the nation. However, he also realizes who God is (loving, patient, fair, kind) and thus feels he can be trusted through the sorrow. Indeed the same principle is true in the life of the believer today. If and when our sin should bring sorrow by way of chastisement, we can trust this God even in the midst of the tragedy.

Halley page 377:

This short book is Jeremiah's lament over the city he had done his best to save. Yet, in his sorrow he also expresses his faith that Jerusalem will rise again from its ruins (3:21-23,25,26,31,32). Jerusalem did indeed rise and gave its name to the capital of a redeemed world of eternal glory, the New Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 21:2).

Structure (Mitchell):

Each chapter of this book is a complete poem. Chapters 1-4 are acrostic in structure (i.e. each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetic order). This was a form of Hebrew poetry used, in part, to aid memorization. Chapters 1,2, and 4 have 22 verses each with each letter beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical order (i.e. the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters). Chapter 3 has 66 verses with every third verse a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical order. Chapter 5 consists of 22 verses, yet for some reason, the acrostic structure is dropped.

Key Word (Nelson's): Lamentations - Three themes run through the five laments of Jeremiah. The most prominent is the theme of mourning but with confession of sin and an acknowledgement of God's righteous judgment comes a note of hope in God's future restoration of His people.

Key Verses (Nelson's):

"The Lord has become like an enemy; He has swallowed up Israel; He has swallowed up all its palaces; He has laid in ruins its strongholds, and He has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation. He has laid waste his booth like a garden, laid in ruins his meeting place; the Lord has made Zion forget festival and Sabbath, and in His fierce indignation has spurned king and priest" (Lamentations 2:5,6).

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22,23).

Key Chapter (Nelson's): 3 - Lamentations 3:22-25 expresses a magnificent faith in the mercy of God - especially when placed against the dark backdrop of chapters 1,2,4, and 5.

Outline:

- I. Desolation 1
 - Jerusalem is personified and describes her ruined condition and declares her woe.
- II. Explanation 2
 - The devastation of Jerusalem is explained as part of God's chastening for His people's ultimate good.
- III. Identification 3
 - Jeremiah identifies with his people, and in agony and duress pours out his soul to Jehovah.
- IV. Contemplation 4
 - Once again the prophet poetically recalls the calamity that befell his beloved city and the reasons which prompted such judgment.
- V. Supplication 5
 - This represents an appeal of Zion to Jehovah

RECIPIENTS

God's people - specifically those in exile in Babylon and Egypt... and us.

CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

From NASB introduction to Lamentations:

Lamentations is not the only Old Testament book that contains individual or community laments. A large number of the Psalms are lament poems, and every prophetic book except Haggai includes one or more examples of the lament genre. However, it is the only book that consists solely of laments.

As a series of laments over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., it stands in a tradition with such ancient non-Biblical writings as the Sumerian "Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur," "Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur," and "Lamentation over the Destruction of Nippur." Orthodox Jews customarily read it aloud in its entirety on the ninth day of Ab, the traditional date of the destruction of Solomon's temple in 586 as well as the date of the destruction of Herod's temple in 70 A.D. Many also read it each week at the Western Wall (known also as the "Wailing Wall") in the Old City of Jerusalem. In addition the book is important in traditional Roman Catholic liturgy, where it is read during the last three days of Holy Week.

This latter tradition reminds us that the book of Lamentations describes Jerusalem's destruction not only for its own sake but also for the profound theological lessons to be learned from it. The horrors of 586 B.C. are not overlooked, of course:

1. Wholesale devastation and slaughter engulf kings (2:6,9; 4:20), princes (1:6; 2:2,9; 4:7,8; 5:12), elders (1:19; 2:10; 4:16; 5:12), priests (1:4,19; 2:6,20; 4:16), prophets (2:9,20), and

- commoners (2:10-12; 3:48; 4:6) alike.
2. Starving mothers are reduced to cannibalism (2:20; 4:10).
 3. The flower of Judah's citizenry is dragged off into ignominious exile (1:3, 18).
 4. An elaborate system of ceremony and worship comes to an end (1:4,10).

But other matters, ultimately of far greater significance, are probed as well.

Jeremiah understood clearly that the Babylonians were merely the human agents of divine retribution and that God Himself has destroyed His city and temple (1:12-15; 2:1-8,17; 4:11). Nor was the Lord's action arbitrary; blatant, God-defying sin and covenant-breaking rebellion were the root causes of His people's woes (1:5,8,9; 4:13; 5:7,16). Although weeping (1:16; 2:11,18; 3:48-51) is to be expected and cries for redress against the enemy (1:22; 3:59-66) are understandable, the proper response in the wake of judgment is sincere, heartfelt contrition (3:40-42). The book that begins with lament (1:1,2) rightly ends in repentance (5:21,22).

In the middle of the book, the theology of Lamentations reaches its apex as it focuses on the goodness of God. He is the Lord of hope (3:21,24,25), of love (3:22), of faithfulness (3:23), of salvation (3:26). In spite of all evidence to the contrary, "*His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness*" (3:22,23).

Two concluding thoughts:

1. This book graphically illustrates: Sin brings sorrow.
2. This book also graphically illustrates God's compassion on the subjects of His wrath. He did not destroy or wipe out Israel.

RESOURCES

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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