

INTRODUCTION TO 25TH BIBLEBOOK

LAMENTATIONS (before and after 586 B.C.)

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A. THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS.

1. The name of the book.

'A lament' is an expression of protest or complaint about misfortune or disaster. It sometimes contains a confession of sin and a prayer for deliverance. Because the authors of lamentations know that the LORD is faithful, they often express their belief that God would save them in the end.

The name 'Lamentation' in Hebrew is 'Eekah', and means ("Alas, how!") It is the common expression of a lament. In the Greek translation it is called 'Threnoi Jeremiou', the Lamentations of Jeremia, because he composed other lamentations in the same period of time. There are five lamentations in the book and the 1st, 2nd and 4th lamentation begin with the words 'Eekah'. However, the dead that is lamented is here not a person, but the holy city of Jerusalem after the Chaldeans under king Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed it in 586 B.C. The 3rd lamentation is about personal adversity and the 5th lamentation is about Israel's adversity, just like some songs found in the Psalms.

2. The character of the book of Lamentations.

The first four lamentations show the characteristic rhythm of Hebrew lamentations, that is, a verse consists of two parts: the first part has three syllables with an accent and the second part has two syllables with an accent.

Each lament (except the 5th lament) is in the form of '*an acrostic*'. That is, *each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order*.¹ The 1st, 2nd and 4th lamentation each have 22 verses that begin with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The 3rd lamentation has 22 times 3 verses. Every three consecutive verses begin with the same letter of the alphabet: alpha, alpha, alpha, bet, bet, bet, gimel, gimel, gimel, etc. The 5th lamentation does not have the typical lamentation rhythm and also not the alphabetical form.

3. The writer, the date and the place of writing.

The prophet Jeremiah certainly composed lamentations, for example: Jeremiah 11:18-20 and Jeremiah 20:7-13. There are certain similarities of expression between the book of Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah 14:17 says, "Let my eyes overflow with tears night and day without ceasing; for my virgin daughter – my people – has suffered a grievous wound, a crushing blow." And Lamentations 3:48-51 says, "Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed. My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees. What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women of my city." Moreover, 2 Chronicles 35:25 (written after 336 B.C.) relates that the prophet Jeremiah composed laments for king Josiah. It says, "Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day, all men and woman singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the laments." However, this statement does not refer to the book of Lamentations, nor to the prophet Jeremiah and also not to any of these laments about Josiah. It could have become the reason why the book of Lamentations was ascribed to Jeremiah.

Lamentation 4:17 says, "Our eyes failed, looking in vain for help; from our towers we watched for a nation that could save us." It is clear that the author included himself in the idle expectation that the nation of Egypt would come and save them. However, the prophet Jeremiah would not do this, because he preached against trusting Egypt (Jeremiah 46).

And Lamentation 5:3,7 says, "We have become orphans and fatherless, our mothers like widows. ... Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment." This is evidently the lament of the generation after the fall of Jerusalem. Likewise Lamentation 1:7, "When her people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help her. Her enemies ... laughed at her destruction."

The five lamentations show that they were written in Canaan. However, at the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was forced to flee together with the Judeans to Egypt. He therefore could not have been the author of Lamentations.

The five lamentations show that they were written from just before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple up to a generation thereafter.

4. The place of Lamentations in the Bible.

The position of the book in the Bible follows the order it has in the Greek (the Septuagint) and Latin (the Vulgate) translations, that is, the book is generally found between Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

However in the Hebrew Bible (the Masoretic Text) Lamentations is found in 'the Writings'.

¹ Psalm 34 is also an acrostic poem.

The Hebrew Bible is divided as follows:

Law (Torah)	<i>Books of the Law:</i> Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	(5)	5
Prophets (Nebi'im)	<i>Former Prophets:</i> Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings	(4)	
	<i>Latter Prophets:</i> Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, 12 Minor prophets	(4)	8
Writings (Ketubim)	<i>Poetry and wisdom:</i> Psalms, Proverbs, Job	(3)	
	<i>Rolls (Megilot):</i> Song of Songs, (Ruth), (Lamentations), Ecclesiastes, Esther	(5/3)	
	<i>Historical books:</i> Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1&2 Chronicles	(3)	<u>11/9</u>
			24/22

The reason why Ruth was separated from Judges and Lamentations from Jeremiah was because they were later used in the Jewish liturgical year as follows:

- The book Song of Songs is read during the 1st month (Passover)
- The book Ruth is read during the 3rd month (Pentecost)
- The book Lamentations is read during the 5th month (the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple)
- The book Ecclesiastes is read during the 7th month (Feast of Tabernacles)
- The book Esther is read during the 12th month (Purim)

The reason Daniel was assigned to the Writings was because he was not regarded as a prophet, but as *a civil servant*. Although he possessed a prophetic gift he was not anointed to be a prophet. Ezra was not a prophet, but *a scribe*. Nehemiah was not a prophet, but *a governor*.

B. THE DIVISION OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS.

The book of Lamentations consist of five lamentations.

- 1. Lamentation 1:1-22.**
- 2. Lamentation 2:1-22.**
- 3. Lamentation 3:1-66.**
- 4. Lamentation 4:1-22.**
- 5. Lamentation 5:1-22.**

The 2nd and 4th lamentation have similarities and are probably written by the same author. They describe the destruction of Jerusalem in lively colours and show that the author was probably an eyewitness of the events, as Lamentations 4:17-18 prove.

The 1st lamentation was written some time later when the siege and fall of Jerusalem was something people remembered, but it was probably not written by an eyewitness.

The 5th lamentation is written even later, because the author is not occupied with the fall of Jerusalem, but rather with the sorrow plight of those left behind in the land. The author belongs to the next generation who grew up in these lamentable circumstances in which the descendants had to suffer for the sins of their fathers.

The 3rd lamentation is personal in nature.

The five lamentations are therefore a collection of lamentations by different authors who live in the miserable circumstances of Canaan before and after the destruction of Jerusalem and after the exile of most of its important citizens. Other small collections of songs/lamentations were eventually absorbed with the Psalms of David into the book of Psalms, like the Songs of the Sons of Korah (Psalm 42-49), the Psalms of Asaph (Psalm 73-85) and the Songs of ascents (Psalm 120-134).

C. THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS.

1. Suffering in adversity is a just judgement.

God's covenant with Israel teaches that the people's disobedience and unfaithfulness to God would result in 'curses' (Deuteronomy 28:15-68) and obedience would result in 'blessings' (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). The prophets continued to proclaim that adversity and disaster were *a just judgement* because of people's sinfulness.

2. Suffering is brought about by the LORD.

The book of Lamentation justifies God's action and shows that it was not because his weakness compared to other gods that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the exile to Babylon had taken place. On the contrary, Judah's defeat had actually been brought about by the LORD himself.

3. Suffering can be wildering.

The book of Lamentations express the tremendous difficulty which people had in coming to terms with the terrible suffering that followed the destruction of Jerusalem, the killing of many people and the exile of most of the rest. They struggled to see that this judgement of God was just. Was the punishment after all not savage and excessive? "Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for" (2:20)?

Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the LORD”(2:21)? Was it right for God to treat his own people, Israel, as an enemy? “Like an enemy the LORD has swallowed up Israel ... Multiplied mourning and lamentation?” Has the LORD abandoned Israel? “The LORD has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary” (2:5,7). The lamentations *freely express agony and bewilderment*.

4. Suffering will end.

Nevertheless, in the midst of this most appalling suffering the hope that God in his great unfailing love *will show compassion* (3:32) and that *an end to suffering will come* (4:22). “Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (3:22-23)!

5. The suffering of believers has significance.

“It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.” The suffering person must become aware and acknowledge that the LORD has laid that yoke on him (3:27-28). “Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace” publicly piled on him by his enemies. The suffering person must experience that the LORD will show his unfailing love and compassion in his own good time (3:30-32). “Let us examine our ways and test them and let us return to the LORD” and confess that “we have sinned and rebelled”. The suffering person must believe and experience that God forgives sins. “I called on your name from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea ... You came near ... and said, ‘Do not fear’” (3:55-56). The suffering person must experience that the LORD really answers prayer.

6. There is a suffering that is borne by one on behalf of the many.

The book of Lamentations speaks of the suffering of the remnant of Israel that were made “the scum and refuse among the nations” (3:45). Their suffering during the exile foreshadowed the suffering of Jesus Christ in his crucifixion, making atonement for all people, as the greatest demonstration of God’s judgement and of his saving love. *His suffering led to our redemption!* “O LORD, you took up my case; you redeemed my life” (3:58).