

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 43

LAMENTATIONS

I. BACKGROUND

What is a “Lamentation?”

Oxford’s English Dictionary defines a “lamentation” as “the passionate or demonstrative expression of grief” or “mourning.” The word “lament” comes from the Latin word for “wailing” or “weeping” *lamenta*.

How did the Book get its title?

The Hebrew title for Lamentations, as the other Hebrew titles of Old Testament books, comes from the first letter in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew title of Lamentations is *‘ekah* which is translated “How...!” When the Hebrew was translated into Greek, the title supplied was *threni*, which means “Wailings” or “Dirges.” When the text was translated into Latin (the Vulgate), the title was the Latin equivalent of the Greek *threni*. That Latin word is *Lamentationes*; hence, we get our title Lamentations.

Who wrote the book? When?

The authorship of the book is anonymous. Tradition places Jeremiah as the author. This is due, in part, to the passage in 2 Chronicles 35:25 which states, “Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the men and women singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments.” This passage in Chronicles, however, does not give us authorship for the book of Lamentations because the laments referenced in Chronicles are different from those in Lamentations. The Chronicles reference laments about King Josiah while Lamentations lament the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem.

The Jewish translators of the Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) combined Lamentations into the book of Jeremiah (and Ruth into Judges) in what most scholars see as an effort to place the Old Testament canon at exactly 22 books. Because 22 was the number of Hebrew letters in the alphabet, it was seen as a complete number and the Old Testament was deemed complete with the books numbering 22. Obviously, that is not an adequate basis for determining the authorship of the book either. The

Septuagint text has an introduction that is not to be found in any manuscripts but was a Greek addition. The introduction can be found with an addition in Catholic translations because it was included in Jerome's Vulgate as well as the Greek Septuagint. The introduction states:

“And it came to pass after Israel had been taken into captivity and Jerusalem had been laid waste that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem and said...”

The book does contain certain linguistic similarities to Jeremiah; however, certain differences are also striking. So, on the basis of language used, we are not able to be conclusive as to whether Jeremiah was the author.

We can be a little more conclusive as to the date of Lamentations. Most every scholar agrees that the description of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple is so striking and vivid that an eyewitness must have composed it. Therefore, the composition date must be after 587 B.C. but not too much after! Most scholars also agree that the composition must predate the return from exile. This gives us a time zone of 587 to 538 B.C. with the earlier time being more likely than the later.

What is unique about the book?

Several things about Lamentations stand out. First, the book belongs in a genre of literature that sets out “mourning” as an art form. Both in other parts of the Bible and in Middle Eastern literature of other cultures at that time period, “lamentations were composed over the deaths of people as well as the death of cultures or cities.”¹

If we were reading the text in Hebrew, then we would immediately be struck by something else. The book is actually five separate poems. Each poem is a chapter long, hence the five chapters! Chapter one (the first poem) has 22 verses, one verse for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Within each of these verses are three lines of poetry. The chapter forms an “acrostic” where each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In an English equivalent, this would mean verse one started with the letter “A.” Verse two would begin with “B,” etc. In Hebrew, verse one begins with “Aleph,” verse two “Beth,” etc.

¹ The Sumerians had laments such as the “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur,” the “Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur,” and the “Lamentation over the Destruction of Nippur.” These laments significantly pre-date Lamentations but indicate that the Lament was an actual literary genre of the times and culture.

Chapter two, the second poem, is much like chapter one. It is also an acrostic poem with 22 verses, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Again, the verses begin with successive letters of the alphabet, and also each verse has three lines or stanzas.

Chapter Three, the third poem, is again an acrostic, but you will notice, unlike the first two poems that each has 22 verses, chapter three has 66 verses! Why? Well, instead of having three stanzas in each verse, chapter three has one stanza in each verse, so the poem has three times as many verses! What's more, each verse does not start with successive letters of the alphabet. Instead, the first three verses each start with Aleph (the first Hebrew letter). Then, the next three verses each start with Beth (the second Hebrew letter). The following three verses each begin with Gimel (the third Hebrew letter, etc.).

Chapter four (the fourth poem) reverts back to the acrostic form of the first and second poems except that there are only two stanzas in each verse.

Chapter five, the fifth and final poem, has twenty verses, but they are not in an alphabetized order.

Why does the book have this elaborate structure?

Scholars generally agree that acrostic approaches (alphabetizing a text or poem) were used by the Jews to help in memorizing the material. Here, however, most scholars agree that the reason is most likely different. It would not aid the memorization process much to have the "Aleph" verses in chapters one, two, three and four. Most scholars agree that the A through Z nature of each poem is to emphasize that the poems are "full" or complete. In other words, even mourning has its limits, and while it should be fully worked through, once you have done so, you are through. Gottwals writes in *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (1954) that the carefully crafted verses are "to encourage completeness in the expression of grief, the confession of sin and the instilling of hope." (p. 28).

What are the traditional uses of the book?

The Jewish faith has read the book on the 9th of Av, which is approximately the date for the destruction of the temple of Solomon as well as the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Many Jews read the book today weekly at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The Catholic Church reads the book during the last three days of Holy Week as a part of the liturgy. In

fact, we still have the text as set forward by the choirmaster for Pope Leo X in the early 1500's. The church put the Lamentations into its paschal service to exemplify lament, atonement and repentance.

Today, the Lamentations are used in Catholic *Tenebrae* services. The Latin word *Tenebrae* means "darkness." *Tenebrae* is a very ancient service of prayers in the Church that takes place during the darkness of night. Many parishes are now reviving this extraordinarily moving service, which consists of three sets of verses from the Lamentations of Jeremiah chanted on each of three nights of Holy Week: Wednesday, Thursday and Friday (Originally this was a service of Matins said in monasteries before dawn on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. That is how the Lamentations were sung for Pope Leo X.).

Although not a traditional use, many today find solace in reading the words of Lamentations and receiving the encouragement that they are not the first to pass through thick dark night before finding the rays of morning's sunlight.

II. TEXT

A. *Themes*

Doom and Hope

An overarching theme to Lamentations is found in the idea of doom and hope. The book is almost the reversal of the prophetic messages of Jeremiah and others. The prophets had pleaded with the people to turn from their sin in the face of God's coming judgment. Lamentations is *post-judgment* and tells the people that AFTER judgment, people should move in repentance and grief knowing that God's love is unrelenting and will bring morning after the darkest night. That is our hope and that is the theme offered in the book.

Disobedience's Consequences

A second related theme lies in the affirmation that the destruction of Jerusalem is the logical and inevitable result of such rampant disobedience to God's commands and warnings.

God's Mercy Prevails

We are to trust in God's mercies. Even in the midst of the pain that sin brings on, we find God with us. In his faithfulness, he promises to walk with us through even the darkest moments brought on by our own sin.

God is good

The goodness of God is set out in the apex of the book, the "hinge" chapter three. God is set out as the Lord of hope (21, 24-25), of love (22), and of faithfulness (23). He is the God of salvation and restoration (26).

A Funeral Dirge

In some sense, Lamentations itself becomes a funeral dirge. The past glories of Judah were gone forever. The only future would be a completely new beginning. The destruction was so complete that the only proper response was to mourn as if one was dead.

B. Memorable passages

Lamentations 3:22-24 forms the words of a number of songs and memory verses. They set out hope for all sinners. The N.I.V. translates the verses:

"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. I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'"

C. Synopsis of poems

Poem one set out The Desolation and Misery of Jerusalem. The description of the destruction and desolation is heart rending (verses 1-11). Jerusalem cries out its own desolation in verses 11 through 16. Verse 17 sets out the poet's lament. The poem ends with Jerusalem's confession of its sin (18-22).

Poem two centers on the Lord's anger with his people. In verses 1-9, the Lord casts off the people and the temple. The people's resultant agony is described in verses 10-17. The people are exhorted to prayer in verses 18 and 19. The people then offer a sorrowful response in the final verses of this lament (20-22).

Poem three changes perspective. Rather than a National Prayer for the country, the third poem is much more a personal prayer of an Israelites complaint. The poet sets out his personal sufferings in the first 20 verses. Verses 21 through 39 set out passages of consolation and the hope of God's grace. The poet then sets a call to repentance in verses 40-51. This provides the ground for a growth of hope in verses 52-57 and an appeal for vengeance in verses 58-66.

Poem four contrasts Judah in the past to Judah in the future. Verses 1-11 offer contrasts of a very graphic detail. The sins of the leaders are set out in verses 12-16. The vain hopes the people had are detailed in verses 17-20. The end of the doom is then the finish of the poem in verses 21-22.

The fifth and final poem is an appeal to the Lord. After setting as a memory before God the affliction of the people (1-18), the Lord's goodness and abiding power are set out as the people's only hope in verses 19-22.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

- A. Sin hurts.
- B. Tragedies come.
- C. Confession is right.
- D. God reigns.
- E. Hope lives.
- F. Trust in God.