



Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is a collection of five poems lamenting the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians at the time of the exile. They are written in a mix of third person (he/she/it/they) and first person (I/we) and recognize that their current disaster was directly connected to their past disobedience to God. The poems plead with God to see their disaster and to act to save them.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 20 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-22; 5.1-22



Genre

Poetry



Anything tricky?

The assumption that suffering happens because of a punishment by God. It is important to recognize that this link is particular to the exile, but not necessarily to all suffering.



Inspiring quotes

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.

(Lamentations 1.1)

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.

(Lamentations 1.12)

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.

(Lamentations 3.22)



About the Author

Traditionally both Judaism and Christianity attribute Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah. The problem with this is that Jeremiah went to Egypt during the exile, but these poems seem to have been written by people who stayed in Judah. On the other hand the recognition of the link between the people's behaviour and the exile would fit well with what Jeremiah said.

If the author is not Jeremiah then the identity of the author(s) is unknown

What do we know about him?

Jeremiah (around 626-587 bc) was a prophet who prophesied before and at the start of the exile to the King and people of Judah, warning them of the disaster to come.



About the times

The start of the exile (597-587 bc) was a time of devastation and loss. It took place over a number of years and was the result of various rebellions. Judah had been in the Babylonian empire since 612 bc but at the start of the sixth century bc attempted to rebel against them and withhold their taxes. The response of the Babylonians was swift and harsh. It began with the first wave of exile in which the people in the highest echelons of society (including the King) were taken from Judah to live in Babylon in captivity (597 bc) but then continued ten years later after another rebellion with more people being taken into exile and the temple being destroyed.

What were people feeling?

Lamentations, more than any other book in the Bible, captures the emotion of what it felt like to be someone from Judah at this point in history.

Other books set around this time

Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel



What kind of Book is it?

Poetry. Lamentations contains five poems of lament which capture the devastation of what it felt like to lose their land.



How is it structured?

- | | |
|--------|-----------------------------------|
| 1.1-22 | There is no one to comfort them |
| 2.1-22 | All there is is anger and weeping |
| 3.1-66 | God has not forgiven them |
| 4.1-22 | Utter devastation |
| 5.1-22 | Plea for restoration |



Look out for...

These poems are packed with emotion. Take time to notice it and feel its force as you read.

Some people think that you can sense both male and female voices speaking in these poems. See what you think, can you get any sense of the gender of those speaking?

Chapters 1, 2 and 4 are acrostic (i.e. begin with subsequent letters of the alphabet). You won't be able to see this in your English translation, but look out for any ways in which the author(s) has inserted particular bits of style into the poems.



What could this mean for me?

Lamentations does not represent silent suffering, but angry, grieving lament. Reflect as you read on the importance of expressing deep emotion rather than bottling it up.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Did the emotions of Lamentations affect you at all as you read? Or did they all feel too far away?
- If you were to grieve for something that is going on in the world at the moment what language would you use? Are there any phrases you might pick from this book to help you?
- Do we lament out loud enough? If we were to lament something going on in our world (or society or lives), what kind of form could it take?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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