

Lamentations

Original Historical Setting

Author: Jeremiah

Written: ~586 B.C. – soon after the fall of Jerusalem

Audience: Probably those Jewish witnesses to the fall of Jerusalem

Occasion: The book does not say what prompted it to be written except it is obvious that it is to mourn the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Timeline:

- 626 BC – Jeremiah called to prophesy
- 608 BC – Jehoiakim begins reign in Judah
- 598 BC – Jehoiachin begins reign in Judah
- 598 BC – Zedekiah begins reign in Judah
- 586 BC – Jerusalem falls to Babylonians
- 585 BC – Jeremiah taken to Egypt

World Events that occur simultaneously

- 612 B.C. – Babylon captures Assyrian capital of Nineveh
- 605 B.C. – Babylon defeats Pharaoh Necho of Egypt
- 600 B.C. – Hinduism teaches reincarnation
- 560 B.C. – Siddhartha Gautama founder of Buddhism born

Features and Structure

- Each of the 5 chapters is a separate poem of lament
- **Outline**
 - Ch 1 –Jerusalem’s Destruction
 - Ch 2 –Yahveh’s Anger Described
 - Ch 3 –Jeremiah’s Grief and Hope
 - Ch 4 –Yahveh’s Anger Defended
 - Ch 5 –Jerusalem’s Prayer

Memory Verse: Lamentations 3:22-24

Genre/Literary style

A lament written in Hebrew poetry with acrostic features

Key text(s)

3:23 – Great is Thy faithfulness

What to look for

- Notice that Chapters **1, 2, 4** and **5** all consist of 22 chapters. Chapter **3** contains 66 verses (3 times 22).
- Chapters **1-4** are all an acrostic. Each of the 22 verses begins with the next of the 22 Hebrew letters of the alphabet starting with *aleph*, then *beth* and so on. Chapter **3** begins every 3 verses with each letter.
- Chapter **5** contains 22 verses but is not an acrostic.
- This structure would have been very challenging to accomplish but it was probably achieved for 2 reasons.
 - 1) Acrostics help in aiding memorization
 - 2) Just as the writer has exhausted the entire alphabet, the songs symbolize completeness. It’s as though Jeremiah is saying that the Jews have suffered grief from A-Z many times over.

Interesting facts

- Lamentations comes from the word “lament” which means to mourn, regret deeply or express grief about. This is why Jeremiah is known as the “weeping prophet.”
- In 1923 Thomas Chisholm wrote the great hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. He sent it, along with a few other poems from the 1200 he had written, to Moody Bible Institute where it became their unofficial hymn.
- Many Jews gather at the exposed Western Wall of the old city and mourn the fall of the holy city, kiss the wall, water it with their tears and read the Book of Lamentations along with other suitable Psalms. Thus this wall is also known as the Wailing Wall.
- In the Hebrew Bible Lamentations is known as ‘*Elkhah*, meaning “How,” which typically begins a song of lament.