

Lamentations

Lamentations is perhaps the saddest book of the Old Testament. It was written by the mourning prophet Jeremiah after the fall of Jerusalem. In five “songs of mourning,” Jeremiah expresses the horror and helplessness of seeing the Jews’ proudest city reduced to rubble. His message of defeat, slaughter, and ruin, which was ignored, is now reality at the hands of the brutal Babylonians. But even as the prophet’s heart breaks, he pauses to proclaim a ringing testimony of deep faith in the goodness and mercy of God. Though the present is bleak with judgment, the future sparkles with the promise of renewal and restoration, as Jeremiah proclaims “Great is Your faithfulness.”

INTRODUCTION

Lamentations describes the funeral of a city. It is a tear-stained portrait of the once proud Jerusalem, now reduced to rubble by the invading Babylonian army. In a five-poem dirge, Jeremiah exposes his emotions. Jeremiah writes his lament in acrostic or alphabetical fashion. Beginning each chapter with the first letter A (aleph), he progresses verse by verse through the Hebrew alphabet, literally weeping from A to Z. And then, amid this terrible holocaust, Jeremiah triumphantly cries out, “Great is Your faithfulness” (3:23). In the face of death and destruction, with life seemingly coming apart at the seams, Jeremiah turns tragedy into a triumph of faith. God has never failed him in the past. God has promised to remain faithful in the future. In the light of the God he knows and loves, Jeremiah finds hope and comfort.

The Hebrew title of this book comes from the first word of chapters 1, 2, and 4: *Ekaḥ*, “Ah, how!” Another Hebrew word *Ginoth* (“Lamentations”) has also been used as the title because it better represents the contents of the book.

AUTHOR

The author of Lamentations is unnamed in the book, but internal and external evidence is consistently in favor of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah the priest and lived just over two miles north of Jerusalem in Anathoth. As an object lesson to Judah, Jeremiah was not allowed to marry (16:2). Because of his radical message of God’s judgment through the coming Babylonian invasion, he led a life of conflict. He was threatened in his hometown of Anathoth, tried for his life by the priests and prophets of Jerusalem, put in stocks, forced to flee from king Jehoiakim, publicly humiliated by the false prophet Hananiah, and thrown into a well.

DATE & SETTING

The historical background of Lamentations is found in the Book of Jeremiah. The book was written soon after Jerusalem’s destruction (Jer. 39; 52) at the beginning of the Exile. Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem from January 588 b.c. to July 586 b.c. It fell on July 19, and the city and temple were burned on August 15. Jeremiah probably wrote these five “songs of mourning” before he was taken captive to Egypt by his disobedient countrymen not long after the destruction (Jer. 43:1–7).