

## The Prophets, Book 3

### Lamentations

The small Book of Lamentations may be thought of as an epilogue to the Book of Jeremiah. The Book of Jeremiah in the Septuagint (ca 300 BC) opens with this preface: "And it came to pass, after Israel was led into captivity and Jerusalem was laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said..." Although the modern, humanist critics generally deny the Jeremiah authorship, unbroken Hebrew tradition identifies Jeremiah as the human writer; and no one else in human history has been better qualified, or more likely, to write this book.

This small book was written soon after the destruction of Jerusalem, as Jeremiah sat among its ruins and grieved. Poor Jeremiah had the painful duty of prophesying, and then witnessing, the final and complete destruction of the City of God, its Temple, and its people. And now all was finished--all was gone. Not even hope remained, except for the prophecies of the New Covenant, which the people had rejected, or forgotten, in their wild and final embrace of paganism.

For Jeremiah the Old Covenant era, the plans and provision of God for His chosen people and their homeland were at a final end. It was over--all over. Nothing remained but ashes, watered with Jeremiah's tears<sup>1</sup>.

The Poetic Form of the Book. The Book of Lamentations consists of five chapters, with each chapter being a Hebrew poem; in this small book we may think of Jeremiah the prophet also as Jeremiah the poet for, in this small book, he is definitely both.

The first four chapters are written as acrostics, based on the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Chapters One, Two, and Four are of 22 verses each, in which the first word of each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in perfect alphabetical order, i.e., the first word of the first verse begins with the first letter, *aleph*; the first word in the second verse begins with the second letter, *beth*, etc; and the first word of the last verse begins with *tau*, the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter Three is an acrostic, but with its 66 verses arranged in 22 groups of three. In this chapter the first word of the first verse, in each group of three, begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical order, from *aleph* to *tau*.

The 5th chapter is written in an even more interesting form, called *ginah*. It consists of 22 verses, but they are not alphabetically arranged. Instead, each verse

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<sup>1</sup> For traditions concerning the death of Jeremiah, see the introduction to the study guide to the Book of Jeremiah.

consists of two parts, with the second part of the verse a muted, weaker reflection, faintly echoing the first part. This is called "limping verse," and is thought to express the contrast of the powerful history of Jerusalem and the Hebrew nation in its glory days (the first part of each verse), compared with its weakened, pathetic state at the time of its final destruction by Nebuchadnezzar (the second part of each verse).

The five poems are written as elegies, lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Hebrew priesthood.

Its Place in Hebrew Worship. Lamentations is read in synagogues on the 9th day of the 4th month to commemorate the day in which there was no longer any food, and the city was surrendered to the Babylonians (as recorded in Jeremiah 52:6-7).

**A. Author.** Although Lamentations does not bear the human author's name, the Septuagint (ca 300 BC), Jerome's Latin Vulgate (ca 480 AD), and universal ancient tradition agree that Jeremiah was the poet/prophet who wrote it.

Jeremiah's Grotto. Just outside the North Wall of Jerusalem there is a place known today as "Jeremiah's Grotto"; it is beneath the small hill that we know today as Golgotha. Here, according to tradition, Jeremiah wrote this funeral dirge, weeping over the final destruction of Jerusalem.

***NOTE:** If this tradition is valid, then Jeremiah wrote the closing chapter in the Old Covenant and sealed it with his tears, in the same place where, about 600 years later, Jesus would seal the opening of the New Covenant with His blood.*

**B. Place and Date.** Lamentations was almost certainly written in the ruins of Jerusalem, about 600 BC, during the three-month period between the fall of Jerusalem and Jeremiah's forced departure for Egypt.

**C. Theme.** The theme of Lamentations is the heartbreaking contrast of the kingdom's former beauty, glory, prosperity, and power, compared with its wretched and powerless state of ruin after Nebuchadnezzar's final victory and the utter destruction of the city and its Temple.

**D. Highlight.**

1. The Mercies of God Are New Every Morning. (3:21-33)

For me, there is only one highlight in Lamentations: it is the amazing reminder, in the midst of all the deep, dark, gloom, that if we are faithful there is still hope. Sitting there in the rubble and ashes of God's eternal city, its streets and demolished buildings strewn with unburied corpses, with his head in his hands and his heart broken, Jeremiah declares that, in fact, the mercies of God "are new every morning". Among dreadful lamenting over the destruction of the World's most beautiful city, the city so well-situated and fortified that it had been considered impregnable; in the middle of his agonizing over corrupt prophets and priests who

had delighted in shedding innocent blood, and memories of starving women boiling their own children for food, he spoke immortal, shining, words of hope. In the very middle of the middle chapter, these reminders shine forth like a lighthouse beacon on a black and stormy night, reminding us that there is indeed still hope, and that the mercy and compassion of God never fail.

In fact, in the exact center of the center chapter, verse 33 of the 66 verses in Chapter 3, the very heart of the book, we are reminded that God doesn't chasten His children willingly, but reluctantly, because of our rebellion and sin--and He does it because He loves us.