

Deep Dive into Lamentations

Title and place in canon

This small poetic work originally bore no title, but the opening word of the mt, the characteristic lament 'Ah, how!' ('êkâh), was employed in the Hebrew Bible as a superscription. The lxx entitled it Threnoi or 'Wailings', to which the Vulgate added the sub-title, 'It comprises the Lamentations of Jeremiah the prophet'. English versions adopted the title of Lamentations, and following the ancient tradition of authorship designated it 'The Lamentations of Jeremiah'. Talmudic and Rabbinic writers referred to the work simply as qînôt ('Lamentations'), or else as 'êkâh.

In the Hebrew canon the book came third in the five Megilloth or Rolls, which follow the three poetical compositions in the Hagiographa or third division of the canon. Lamentations was read customarily on the ninth of Ab, in mid-July, when the destruction of the Jerusalem temple was commemorated. The lxx placed Lamentations after the prophecy of Jeremiah and the apocryphal book of Baruch, and this position was adopted by other versions including the Vulgate. In the Talmud, Lamentations followed the Song of Solomon in a rearranged order of the poetical books and the Megilloth.

Historical background

Dirge poetry of the kind exemplified by Lamentations was by no means uncommon in Near Eastern antiquity. The Sumerians were the first to write sombre works commemorating the fall of some of their great cities to enemy invaders, one of the most celebrated being the lament over the destruction of Ur. The author of Lamentations stood therefore in a long and respectable literary tradition when he bewailed the destruction of Jerusalem and the desolation of Judah in 587 bc. His poetic outpourings included a sorrowful commentary on the sufferings experienced by the Judeans both during and after the siege of Jerusalem, and also contained a representative confession of national sin. For the author this latter factor had been the real cause of Judah's downfall. There can be absolutely no question whatever as to the specific event which is being commemorated in the dirges, or the sombre nature of the calamity which they depict so forcefully.

Structure, authorship and date

The book comprises five poems, each of which forms the individual chapters. The first four are written as acrostics, making for a highly elaborate and sophisticated construction. The twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet are used in succession to control the length of each of the first four poems, and they also mark the commencement of the individual stanzas or strophes. However, this patternism is not applied mechanically, for although the consonants occurred in their normal alphabetical order in the first poem, the letter pe preceded the consonant 'ayin in the second, third and fourth dirges to make for some slight irregularity.

The first three chapters followed a grouping-pattern involving three lines to a strophe, but there are two exceptions which comprise four-line stanzas (1:7; 2:19), a circumstance which may be entirely accidental. An elaboration of the simple acrostic pattern occurred in the third dirge, where each of the three verses of the stanza began with the same Hebrew consonant. The fourth poem contained only two lines in each strophe, while the fifth was not acrostic at all, but consisted of twenty-two lines and resembled certain psalms of corporate lament such as Psalms 44 and 80.

Though there is an obvious structural resemblance between them, each chapter nevertheless exhibits its own special qualities of form and content. The first poem is arranged in three-line stanzas, in which Jerusalem is depicted as mourning her destruction and crying aloud to her God for vengeance. The second

elegy follows much the same pattern, except for the reversal in alphabetical order of the consonants pe and 'ayin, as noted above. The thought of this poem is more developed, since the author saw that one important cause of the ruin which had overtaken the city and nation lay in the negligence of the prophets for not warning the people clearly of approaching doom. As a consequence of divine judgment, the dirge stressed that any hope for the future would have to be grounded in national contrition.

The third poem is significantly different in structure from the others, being made up of single lines grouped in threes, and commencing with the same consonant of the Hebrew alphabet. Here the personified nation is urged to turn in repentance to God and trust in divine mercy for restoration and the punishment of its enemies. The fourth chapter is very similar to the third, except that each stanza consists of two lines instead of three. After recounting the horrors of the siege and laying the blame for the depraved spirituality of the nation at the door of the priests and prophets, the poem looks towards the restoration of community life and the punishment of hereditary enemies, including the Edomites. The fifth poem, a prayer that the lamenting remnant might be delivered from its distress and restored to prosperity, contains lines equivalent to the number of consonants in the Hebrew alphabet, but is otherwise quite different in form from its precursors.

The authorship of Lamentations was ascribed to Jeremiah by the consensus of Jewish tradition (Targum at Jer. 1:1; Baba Bathra, 15 a), despite the fact that the work is anonymous. LXX and Vulgate followed this ascription of authorship, the LXX version of Lamentations being prefaced by the statement: 'And it came to pass, after Israel was led into captivity and Jerusalem laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said ...', which the Vulgate expanded by adding the phrase, '... with a bitter spirit sighing and wailing ...' Perhaps this tradition of authorship arose from a misunderstanding of 2 Chronicles 35:25, which stated that Jeremiah composed laments over the deceased king Josiah and that these were written 'in the lamentations'. Josephus (Ant. x.5.1) thought that the lament relating to Josiah comprised the fourth chapter of the book of Lamentations, but this seems improbable because the latter concerned a city and its people, not a defunct king. Many literary sources mentioned by the Chronicler are no longer extant, and quite possibly the 'lamentations' to which he alluded comprised some such collection of dirge material which has also perished.

Several commentators have proposed that the traditional views of authorship should be abandoned because of significant literary variations which suggest closer stylistic affinities with certain psalms, the latter part of Isaiah, and portions of Ezekiel, than with the bulk of the prophecies of Jeremiah. This argument is weakened seriously by the entirely unwarranted assumption that parts of Isaiah do not in fact belong to the eighth century bc, a position for which there is no factual evidence whatever. Since Jeremiah reflects the thought of earlier writers periodically, there is no reason why the author of Lamentations should not do precisely the same, and not least if both writers happened to be identical. In favour of Jeremiah as author are the obvious similarities in style and subject-matter which both works exhibit, including such emphases as the ravaging of Virgin Daughter-Jerusalem, the appeal to the righteous Judge for vengeance, and the expectation of divine retribution being wreaked upon those nations which had rejoiced over Judah's collapse.

Whatever may be said for or against the Jeremianic authorship of Lamentations, there can be no doubt that, on grounds of style and content alone, all of the poems came from the same hand, who was evidently an eyewitness of the calamity which overtook Judah. While the authorship of the work must necessarily remain unknown, it seems highly improbable that anyone other than Jeremiah would have been moved to such depths of elegiac expression by the collapse of resistance in Jerusalem and still be in a position to record his feelings in such moving verse. In the present work the anonymity of the composition will be

respected, and where necessary its compiler will be referred to simply as 'the author'. The dating of the book presents little difficulty. It furnishes adequate internal evidence as the work of a person who was an eyewitness of the disasters of 587 bc. The first four chapters may have been written shortly after the deportation of the Judeans to Babylonia, and the final dirge at a somewhat later period, though there is no certainty on this matter. There seems to be no convincing reason for placing the extant composition later than 550 bc, whether or not portions of it were written at rather different times.

The theology of Lamentations

Like all truly inspired poetry, the imagery of the Hebrew lays hold on eternal values and brings them in all their splendour to the notice of mankind. The book of Lamentations is no exception to this, despite the rather obvious fact that its harmonies are written consistently in a minor key. Divine sovereignty, justice, morality, judgment, and the hope of blessing in the distant future, are themes which emerge in solemn grandeur from the cadences of Lamentations. The composition is in many respects sui generis, and it is perhaps this general divergence from all other Old Testament books which has prompted the view that Lamentations has little if any theological content. However, if the book of Job describes calamity and its outcome in the area of personal life, Lamentations can be said to deal with the problem of suffering at the national level, treating as it does of the supreme crisis which saw the end of community life as previously experienced in Judah.

This latter theme is paramount in all the poems, even though each chapter can be regarded as a complete and self-contained composition. There appear to be times when the author finds it virtually impossible to believe that the promised catastrophe has at last occurred. Yet the ruined city bears mute testimony to this tragic event, and hence it falls to the author to determine as satisfactorily as he can the real meaning which underlies this dramatic reversal of the fortunes of earlier days.

In the light of Jeremiah's teachings, the reasons for the collapse of Judah are not hard to find. The author knows full well that the people of Judah had long been apostate, and that, even more seriously, they had consistently ignored the hard lessons taught by the captivity of the northern kingdom for a similar repudiation of covenantal obligations. Now that a like fate had overtaken Judah, everyone was suddenly acutely aware of the serious penalties which a righteous and holy God attached to sin.

In a real sense the poems present a vindication of divine righteousness in the light of the covenant relationship, and like the book of Job they show that God, not man, is the central figure in the drama of history. As the poems of Lamentations unfold, they make it clear that the real tragedy inherent in the destruction of Judah lies in the fact that it could almost certainly have been avoided. The actual causes of the calamity were the people themselves, who were determined at all costs to pursue the allurements of a false and debased paganism in preference to the high moral and ethical ideals inherent in the Sinai covenant.

The irony of it all lay in the fact that over the generations they had been warned time and again by various servants of God that continued indulgence in this immoral way of life would result in drastic punishment, warnings which, in the event, went unheeded. Whereas the book of Job is a theodicy which attempts to explain and justify the ways of God with men, Lamentations consists of a sad commentary on the outworking of the prophetic conviction that those who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind. The ashes of a devastated Jerusalem thus testify at once to the demonstration and the vindication of divine righteousness (1:18).

The recognition of national sin as the real cause of destruction brought with it a pressing consciousness of guilt (1:8; 2:14; 3:40, etc.), and this in turn impels the author to make full confession of sin on behalf of

the apostate people and their leaders as the first step towards claiming divine forgiveness and restoration. Even though it had been long prophesied, the severity of the blow which finally fell on Judah seems to have taken the author somewhat by surprise, and in the second poem he remonstrates with God and reproves him for such drastic action. At the same time, however, he recognizes that divine justice is a complement to divine righteousness, and laments over the grave folly of a covenanted people being so wilful and indifferent as to have lived for so long in evident unawareness of that fact.

As with Jeremiah, the author sees a ray of hope permeating even the darkest cloud. Although Judah has been desolated, her plight is not absolutely beyond any expectation of restoration and renewal. Nevertheless, the nature and content of the poems are such that it is difficult to state this explicitly, though the author can always cling to the assurance that God always keeps his covenantal undertakings (Lam. 3:19–39). In such an internally-consistent and reliable deity it is possible to place one's trust, and in complete resignation to his sovereign will to pray that he may yet again look favourably upon his apostate people and restore them to a measure of their former greatness. Like the author of Job, the writer of Lamentations recognizes that a positive reaction to an experience of suffering is a necessary prerequisite to spiritual maturity. This awareness furnishes the basis for his expectation that, in the goodness of God, the experience of tribulation will be followed by a time of restoration and blessing (Lam. 3:25–30) for a truly penitent people. Such a prospect was a firm part of the covenantal relationship (cf. Deut. 30:1ff.), for God will not reject his covenant people completely, as Paul pointed out (Rom. 11:1ff.).

The reader should be cautioned against any attempt to discover logical doctrinal coherence or a development in theological insight between one poem and the next. While the separate poems manifest a degree of external structural control, the flow of the thought is not by any means as rigorously directed, and in fact is apt to move rather haphazardly as befits the spontaneous outpourings of a grief-stricken spirit. Yet the theological sentiments adumbrated in the poems are timeless in nature, and if the book was not actually used in some manner by the exiles in Babylonia as a means of commemorating the fall of Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 41:4f.; Zech. 7:3), there is little doubt that it would form much the most suitable means of conveying a sense of national contrition and a reliance on the future mercies of God.

Outline

First Dirge (1:1–22)

- a. Jerusalem destroyed (1:1–7)
- b. Destruction follows sin (1:8–11)
- c. A plea for mercy (1:12–22)

Second Dirge (2:1–22)

- a. God's hostility towards his people (2:1–9)
- b. Sufferings consequent upon famine (2:10–13)
- c. True and false prophets (2:14–17)
- d. A tearful prayer to God (2:18–22)

Third Dirge (3:1–66)

- a. The lament of the afflicted (3:1–21)
- b. Divine mercies recalled (3:22–39)
- c. A call for spiritual renewal (3:40–42)
- d. The consequences of sin (3:43–54)
- e. Comfort and imprecation (3:55–66)

Fourth Dirge (4:1–22)

- a. Earlier days recalled (4:1–12)
- b. Sin and its results (4:13–20)
- c. Punishment promised for Edom (4:21–22)

Fifth Dirge (5:1–22)

- a. A plea for mercy (5:1–10)
- b. The nature of sin (5:11–18)
- c. A plea for divine restoration (5:19–22)

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