

The Book Of Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations is a collection of five poems that serve as an anguished response to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., after a long siege by the invading Babylonian army. (See [2 Kgs 25](#) for a prose account of the fall of Jerusalem.) Although the poems are traditionally ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah, this is unlikely. The Hebrew text of the book does not mention Jeremiah at all, and it is difficult to square some of the content of the poetry with what one finds in the Book of Jeremiah itself (cf. [Lam 1:10](#); [2:9](#); [4:17](#), [20](#)). While there are connections in theme and vocabulary among all five chapters (and especially between chaps. [1](#) and [2](#)), the poems may have been composed separately and grouped together later. In any case, they are anonymous compositions probably used by survivors of the catastrophe of 587 B.C. in a communal expression of grief and mourning.

Jewish liturgical tradition considers the book one of the “scrolls” (*megillot*); it is read once a year on the ninth of Av (August–September), a fast day commemorating the destruction of both the first Temple in 587 B.C. and the second Temple in A.D. 70. While passages from chap. [3](#) are often incorporated into Christian services for Holy Thursday or Good Friday, the Church has otherwise tended to neglect the book. It is not hard to see why; a more anguished piece of writing is scarcely imaginable: from its portrayal of Jerusalem in chaps. [1](#) and [2](#) as an abandoned widow exposed to endless dangers, to the broken man of chap. [3](#), to the bleak description in chap. [4](#) of the inhabitants of the devastated city, to the final unanswered communal lament of chap. [5](#), the reader is not so much engaged by the Book of Lamentations as assaulted by it. But with its unsparing focus on destruction, pain, and suffering the book serves an invaluable function as part of Scripture, witnessing to a biblical faith determined to express honestly the harsh realities of a violent world and providing contemporary readers the language to do the same.

As a literary work, the Book of Lamentations combines elements of communal and individual laments (in which the speakers attempt to persuade God to intervene in the face of an acute crisis), funeral dirges (in which a death is mourned), and ancient Near Eastern city-laments (in which the destruction of a city is mourned). The meter is called *Qinah* (lament), that is, each verse normally has three beats followed by two. The poems are acrostics: in chaps. [1–4](#), the separate stanzas begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet from the first to the last. The last chapter, while not strictly an acrostic, nevertheless partially conforms to the pattern in its use of 22 lines, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Far from destroying the spontaneous pathos of the songs, this feature conveys the expression of a profound grief that might otherwise seem to be without limit (cf. [2:13](#)).

The book may be divided as follows:

1. The Desolation of Jerusalem ([1:1–22](#)).
2. The Lord’s Wrath and Zion’s Ruin ([2:1–22](#)).
3. The Voice of a Suffering Individual ([3:1–66](#)).
4. Miseries of the Besieged City ([4:1–22](#)).
5. The Community’s Lament to the Lord ([5:1–22](#)).