

LAMENTATIONS

- A dirge of National lamentation over the unrecoverable past, much like Job is the dramatic expression of personal suffering
- This book is the vindication, the “amen” on the message of the monarchial prophets who had delivered God’s covenant threats.

1. Background

The name of this book is derived from the LXX title of *Threnoi*, (Vulgate = *Treni*), although the Talmud calls the book *Qinoth*, which also means lamentations. The dirge-like “qinah” phrasing is taken from this Hebrew term for lament.

The Hebrew name of the book is חִכָּאֵז *‘ekah*, an ejaculatory “How!” which introduces the first, second and fourth laments.

This book is one of the five Megilloth (“scrolls” marking Jewish holidays/anniversaries) and has been read annually on the 9th of ‘Ab to commemorate the destruction of the two temples.

2. Author and date of Lamentations

—by an anonymous prophet in Judah, first half of sixth century

Jeremiah the traditional author

attributed to Jeremiah in LXX and Vulgate:

“And it came to pass after Israel had been taken into captivity and Jerusalem had been laid waste that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem and said...”

Young and Harrison believe this was a false deduction based on II Chron. 35:25:

25 Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah. And to this day all the singing men and the singing women speak of Josiah in their lamentations. They made it a custom in Israel; and indeed they are written in the Laments.

also in favor of Jeremiah is his weeping for Jerusalem (Jer. 9:1, etc.; cf. Lam. 1:16)

Timing: written after Jerusalem destroyed in 587 BC (e.g., 1:1, 10, 18; 5:18)

if written by Jeremiah, then probably fairly soon after the destruction of Jerusalem

if written by someone else, the author apparently was an eyewitness of the destruction, 4:20:
“our...”

written certainly before the restoration under Cyrus in 536 BC

3. Structure of Lamentations = five poems, one chapter each

Not only are the individual poems shaped as 3:2 dirges, but the whole of the book appears to be arranged as a 3 + 2 dirge (Dorsey, pl 247).

Chapter	Lines
1	66
2	66
3	66 X 3
4	44
5	22

The first three chapters follow a pattern of 66 lines, building to a climax in the center of the book; the fourth chapter is immediately shorter, and the final chapter is shortest with 22 lines and has lost the order of the previous acrostic poems.

The form of this macro-structure gives the impression of disintegration, and a “dying away” intended by the 3:2 elegiac dirge.

Poems 1-4 = acrostic based on the order of the Hebrew alphabet, perhaps signifying the dramatic totality of suffering

(C + V *sin* and *shin* are used interchangeable)

Poems 2-4, reverse the *i* + P *`ayin* and *pe* position

This order of the alphabet has been found on the oldest extant Hebrew writing of substantial length, which is the Hebrew alphabet, written left to right—the Izbet Sartah shard, dated 1200-1000 BC (*BAR* 4:3 [Sept-Oct, 1978], 23-30, esp. p. 30).

Poem 5, regular rhythm of 3 + 3, non-acrostic, but still 22 verses for 22 letters of alphabet

4. Content of Lamentations

The “Lament” (title in LXX and Kittel = “Threni”) is a funeral dirge (cf. Zephaniah). It combines and contrasts the former glory with the present wretchedness. The 3:2 meter is typical of the dirge, and in Hebrew literature such as this has been labeled “Qinah” meter.

cf. 2:15; 4:5

2:15 All who pass by clap their hands at you; They hiss and shake their heads At the daughter of Jerusalem: "Is this the city that is called 'The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth'?"

Yet, in spite of the great destruction and ruin of the city, God will remain faithful to his covenants, and will redeem his people; there are rays of faith and hope for the future. These messages of hope in the midst of severe suffering are rooted in the people’s God of the covenant and help them come to grips with His theodicy. This passage of hope is found at the center climax of the book (Lam. 3:21-26).

3:22 Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not.
23 They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.
24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!"
25 The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him.
26 It is good that one should hope and wait quietly For the salvation of the LORD.