

Lamentations

Introduction

Content

- Lamentations is a collection of five poems
 - The poems are about the destruction of Jerusalem and its aftermath
- The poems are poems of lament and complaint
- The Hebrew scriptures are no strangers to lament material
 - Such material occurs mostly in Job, Psalms, Jeremiah, and Lamentations
 - Lament Psalms vary, but frequently they regard oppression by enemies and God's seeming absence
 - Lament in Job is mostly due to innocent suffering
 - The suffering in Lamentations is punishment for disobedience
 - Psalm 51 would be a similar psalm

Date

- The text clearly grapples with the destruction of Jerusalem
 - Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 587-586 BC
- There is nothing indicating a return from exile
 - Which occurred ca. 520 BC
 - In fact, the last poem ends wondering if God has abandoned Israel forever
- There are no supernatural foretelling events
- Linguistics are consistent with Hebrew around the time of the fall of Jerusalem
- All these elements place the work firmly between 587 and 520
 - The work is rare in that there is widespread agreement about the date of writing

Composition

- Five poems, all about the destruction of Jerusalem
 - The five poems correspond to the five chapters
- There is no story, and collective movement is also difficult to discern
 - For example, there is no linear progression from despair to hope
 - The book ends on a very dismal note

Composition

- The poems do follow a very specific structure
- Each poem has 22 stanzas
 - In poems 1-3, each stanza has 3 lines
 - A few stanzas have 4, but they are rare
 - Poem 4 contains 2 lines per stanza
 - Poem 5 has one line per stanza
 - Poems 1 – 4 are acrostics
 - Poems 1, 2, and 4 have each stanza beginning with the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet
 - Poem 3 has each line of a given stanza starting with that letter
 - This is why chapter 3 has 66 verses, even though the poem is not any longer

Authorship

- Lamentations is traditionally attributed to Jeremiah
- Largely because the Septuagint has a superscription which attributes the work to Jeremiah
- Jeremiah's attribution may be traced to 2 Chr. 35:25
- The Masoretic text has no attribution
 - It does not place the work alongside Jeremiah

Authorship - Cohesion

- The work is a tightly cohesive whole
 - This is true regardless of whether Jeremiah, someone else, or a group of people wrote it
- The five poems all have the same structure
 - Four are acrostics
- The poems interact with and know about each other
 - This is not simply a collection in the way the psalms are
- The authorship is likely:
 - A single person
 - A directed project

Voices

- There are two main voices
 - A singular poet/prophet/observer
 - This voice makes up most of the content.
 - Half of poem 1, most of poems 2 and 4, all of poem 3
 - Zion/Jerusalem/Congregation
 - Sometimes a singular personified voice of the city
 - Sometimes a collective voice for the congregation
- Some people conclude there are more voices
 - Determining who is speaking is difficult

Interpretive Framework

- Lamentations is difficult to dissect what is normative
- Some other scriptures are like this as well
 - Ecclesiastes
 - Imprecatory Psalms
 - Job

Parsing Lamentations

- There are two main voices, the poet and Zion/congregation
- We may view the poet as someone
 - who has undergone God's punishment and come out with his faith intact
 - Now offers Zion counsel
- We may view Zion as
 - In great distress and agony
 - Not fully aware of its sin
 - Not fully ready to turn back to God
- We may generally take the poet's remarks as representing a godly voice
- We should appreciate the voice of Zion as offering a real lament in the face of suffering
 - But we should not view it as offering good advice

Features

- Poem 1 – Desolation
 - Describes the forlorn nature of Jerusalem after its destruction and exile
- Poem 2 – Destruction/Disregard
 - Describes the unleashing of God's wrath
 - And his disregard for things he once cared for
- Poem 3 – Despair and Devotion
 - The individual describes the punishment he has received directly from God
 - But he also professes hope and advocates for repentance
- Poem 4 – Devaluation
 - The language focuses on how great things were, and how dreary they are now
- Poem 5 – Desperate Plea
 - The congregation lifts up an extended plea to God

Lamentations 1

Desolation

Chapter 1

- The poem has two speakers
 - The individual poet/prophet/observer
 - Zion speaking as an individual
- The poem fits nicely into two halves
 - The poet speaks in vss. 1 – 11a
 - Zion takes over and speaks from 11b – 22
- The language is mostly describing the present circumstances
- Most of the language in the first poem focuses on the concept of desolation
- Much of the language is passive

Desolation

1 How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
she who was great among the
nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
has become a slave.

2 She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
they have become her enemies.

3 Judah has gone into exile because of affliction
and hard servitude;
she dwells now among the nations,
but finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

4 The roads to Zion mourn,
for none come to the festival;
all her gates are desolate;
her priests groan;
her virgins have been afflicted,
and she herself suffers bitterly.

5 Her foes have become the head;
her enemies prosper,
because the Lord has afflicted her
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.

6 From the daughter of Zion
all her majesty has departed.
Her princes have become like deer
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

7 Jerusalem remembers
in the days of her affliction and
wandering
all the precious things
that were hers from days of old.
When her people fell into the hand of the foe,
and there was none to help her,
her foes gloated over her;
they mocked at her downfall.

8 Jerusalem sinned grievously;
therefore she became filthy;
all who honored her despise her,
for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans
and turns her face away.

9 Her uncleanness was in her skirts;
she took no thought of her
future;
therefore her fall is terrible;
she has no comforter.
“O Lord, behold my affliction,
for the enemy has triumphed!”

10 The enemy has stretched out his hands
over all her precious things;
for she has seen the nations
enter her sanctuary,
those whom you forbade
to enter your congregation.

11 All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they trade their treasures for food
to revive their strength.
“Look, O Lord, and see,
for I am despised.”

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Desolation

- Notice that most of the language is passive
 - It describes what has happened to, and what has become of Jerusalem
 - There are few descriptions of who has done this
- When there are descriptions of someone who has done something to Jerusalem, it focuses on her enemies
 - This could *almost* be describing any conquest

Just Like Everyone Else

- Israel's vocation was to be a nation separate from everyone else:
 - Be holy, for I am holy
- But Israel wanted to be like everyone else:
 - “Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5)
- Every earthly nation eventually falls
 - Usually because they are conquered by someone else
 - Egypt, Syria, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome
- God has granted Israel's request
 - They are like every other nation ruled by a king

Zion's Response

"Look, O Lord, and see,
for I am despised."

12 "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
which was brought upon me,
which the Lord inflicted
on the day of his fierce anger.

13 "From on high he sent fire;
into my bones he made it descend;
he spread a net for my feet;
he turned me back;
he has left me stunned,
faint all the day long.

14 "My transgressions were bound into a yoke;
by his hand they were fastened
together;
they were set upon my neck;
he caused my strength to fail;
the Lord gave me into the hands
of those whom I cannot withstand.

15 "The Lord rejected
all my mighty men in my midst;
he summoned an assembly against me
to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a winepress
the virgin daughter of Judah.

16 "For these things I weep;
my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me,
one to revive my spirit;
my children are desolate,
for the enemy has prevailed."

17 Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is none to comfort her;
the Lord has commanded against Jacob
that his neighbors should be his
foes;
Jerusalem has become
a filthy thing among them.

18 "The Lord is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his
word;
but hear, all you peoples,
and see my suffering;
my young women and my young men
have gone into captivity.

19 "I called to my lovers,
but they deceived me;
my priests and elders
perished in the city,
while they sought food
to revive their strength.

20 "Look, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my stomach churns;
my heart is wrung within me,
because I have been very
rebellious.
In the street the sword bereaves;
in the house it is like death.

21 "They heard my groaning,
yet there is no one to comfort me.
All my enemies have heard of my trouble;
they are glad that you have done
it.
You have brought the day you announced;
now let them be as I am.

22 "Let all their evildoing come before you,
and deal with them
as you have dealt with me
because of all my transgressions;
for my groans are many,
and my heart is faint."

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Zion's Response

- The response still features a lot of language of desolation
- But the language transitions to being active
 - And much of Zion's misery is attributed to God
- Zion admits to rebellion
 - And calls God just in his actions against her
- Zion cries out to God to punish other evildoers

Lamentations 2

Destruction and Disregard

Active Destruction

- Poem 1 could *almost* be describing any conquest
 - “How like a widow she has become”
 - “All her majesty has departed”
- But poem 2 is clear in its attribution of the destruction to God
 - “He cast down from heaven to earth”
 - “The Lord has swallowed up without mercy”
 - “He has killed all who were delightful in our eyes”

Wrathful Destruction

- The poem is also clear that this destruction is an outpouring of God's wrath
 - “The Lord in his anger has set Zion under a cloud”
 - “In his wrath he has broken down the strongholds”
 - “He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel”

Purposeful Destruction

- It would be easy to regard the wrathful aspect as indicating a thoughtless rampage
 - But this is not the picture the poet presents
 - Rather God's wrath and destruction are planned and purposeful
- vs. 4: "He has bent his bow like an enemy"
- vs. 17: "The Lord has done what he purposed; he has carried out his word which he commanded long ago;"

Measuring Line

- The poet mentions a measuring line in vs. 8:
 - “The Lord determined to lay in ruins the wall of daughter Zion; he stretched out a measuring line”
- Measuring lines typically denote care, precision and planning
 - Job 38:4-5
 - Jer. 31:38-40
 - Is. 44:12-14
 - Zech. 1:15-17
- Things are so bad, and have been so bad for so long, that God has undertaken a carefully planned project of Jerusalem’s destruction

Complete Disregard

- We know that the people had a disordered view of holy things
 - And of what God's view of holy things was
- They thought he would never allow anything bad to happen to those things (tabernacle, temple, Jerusalem, etc)
- They thought they could use them as talismans
 - 1 Sam. 4
- The people were ready to stone Jeremiah when he prophesied against the temple
 - Jer. 26:1-11

Disregard

- The people have now found out how wrong they were
 - vs. 1: “He has not remembered his footstool”
 - vs. 4: “He killed all who were delightful in our eyes in the tent of the daughter of Zion”
 - Vss. 6 – 7:
 - “He has laid waste his booth like a garden”
 - “Laid in ruins his meeting place”
 - “Spurned king and priest”
 - “Scorned his altar”
 - “Disowned his sanctuary”

Horrors of Siege

- The destruction of Jerusalem is described in several places:
 - 2 Kings 25
 - 2 Chr. 26
 - Jer. 52
- The accounts in Kings and Jeremiah are almost identical
 - The siege itself is given a few sentences
 - Stating that the famine was severe
 - The language is fairly matter-of-fact
- The Chronicles account is even shorter
 - The siege isn't mentioned at all, only the final destruction
 - It is also fairly matter-of-fact

Horrors of Siege

- Now the poet and Zion will describe the siege with some graphic details
 - Infants and babies faint in the streets (11)
 - Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children (19)
 - Should women eat the fruit of their womb (20)
 - In the dust of the streets lie young and old (21)
 - Young men and women have fallen by the sword (21)

Poet's Plea

- The poet speaks directly to Jerusalem
 - He entreats them to pour out their hearts to God in their distress
- Jerusalem responds immediately
 - Exactly as the poet has asked them to cry out
 - Notice there is no confession or repentance

The Enemies' Progress

- We saw a complaint in poem 1 about enemies' access:
 - 1:10 – “She has seen the nations enter her sanctuary”
- But we have additions
 - The Lord has made Zion forget festivals and sabbaths (6)
 - The enemies control the walls and palaces (7)
 - God has summoned Israel's enemies to a party (22)