

---

# BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

---

**Approximate date:** 586-538 B.C.E. (Right, some conservative-moderate); 500s B.C.E. (some conservative-moderate); 500s-300s B.C.E. (Left)

**Time period:** immediately after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians

**Author(s):** Jeremiah and/or Baruch (Right; some conservative-moderate); Baruch (some conservative-moderate); anonymous writers and editors (Left)

**Location of author:** Land of Israel or Jerusalem (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel, Jerusalem, and/or Babylon (Left)

**Target audience and their location:** Southern Kingdom Israelites at the beginning of the Babylonian exile (Right, some conservative-moderate, some Left); Southern Kingdom Israelites during the Babylonian exile (some conservative-moderate, some Left); Southern Kingdom Israelites after the Babylonian exile (some Left)

**People:**

the author (Jeremiah or Baruch), Judah (mostly Southern Kingdom exiles), Israel

**People mentioned:**

Jacob

**Places:**

Jerusalem, Zion, Edom, Uz, Egypt, Assyria

**Key Themes:**

the author (Jeremiah or Baruch) issues a cry over the fall of Jerusalem / the Lord is the One who issued the calamity that has befallen Jerusalem / the author speaks for a Jerusalem that is groaning / the Lord is described as an enemy that has laid waste to Jerusalem / the author describes the internal torment he feels for Jerusalem's fall, as he does not know what he can do to offer help / the author details how the Lord has made him endure through terrible trial / the author describes how not all have been consumed, because of God's compassion / the author speaks of the need to return to the Lord, because of Jerusalem's worthlessness / the author calls upon God for His vengeance upon those who harmed him / the author bemoans the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians / the author details the decrepit state of what has happened to Judah and its people / the Lord is praised

**Key Scriptures:** Lamentations 1:7-11; 2:4-5, 11, 14, 17; 3:22-26, 37-40; 4:11-13; 5:19-22 / **The author mourns for Jerusalem** (1:1-22); **God's anger at sin** (2:1-22);

**Hope in the midst of affliction (3:1-66); God's anger is satisfied (4:1-22); The author pleads for restoration (5:1-22)**

**Theological Summary:** The traditional Hebrew title of the Book of Lamentation is *Eikah* (אֵיכָה), meaning either “how” or “alas” (cf. 1:1; 2:1; 4:1).<sup>1</sup> The Talmud actually refers to the text as *qinot*, meaning “lamentations” (b.*Bava Batra* 14b), followed by the Greek Septuagint's title of *Thrēnoi* (ΘΡΗΝΟΙ) and Latin Vulgate's *Lamentationes*. This book is a collection of laments that bewail the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Some believe that the common title “Lamentations” is misleading as the overall theme deals more with grief than laments.<sup>2</sup> Lamentations is placed among the five *Megillot* of the Tanach Writings in Jewish tradition, but placed immediately after the Book of Jeremiah in the Christian book order of the Old Testament following the Septuagint and Vulgate.<sup>3</sup> Lamentations is specifically placed among the *Megillot* because of its usage for special occasions in Judaism, but the order of it being placed after Jeremiah was probably present among some First Century Jewish traditions.<sup>4</sup>

The text of Lamentations itself is strictly anonymous and claims no author. Jewish tradition ascribes some level of authorship to Jeremiah, sometimes based on 2 Chronicles 35:25: “Jeremiah chanted a lament for Josiah...they are also written in the Lamentations [Heb. *ha'qinot*, הַקִּינֹת].” There is debate among theologians whether this is a direct reference to the Book of Lamentations, or some other piece. The Septuagint rendering of Lamentations 1:1 specifically names Jeremiah, though, as its author: “And Ieremias lamented over Iosias, and all the leading men and leading women have spoken the lament over Iosias until this very day” (NETS). The authorship of Jeremiah for Lamentations is not impossible as we do see some similarity in style between Lamentations and Jeremiah 7:29; 8:21; 9:1, 10, 20. Jeremiah was an eyewitness to the judgment of God on Jerusalem that is thoroughly described in Lamentations. Jeremianic authorship of Lamentations is attested in the Talmud (b.*Bava Batra* 15a)<sup>5</sup> and was followed by the Church Fathers.<sup>6</sup>

Conservatives today generally lean toward some kind of Jeremianic involvement in Lamentations, but would concede that the laments may have actually been composed by Jeremiah's scribe Baruch,<sup>7</sup> accounting for some stylistic changes. “Theological similarities with Jeremiah were to be expected from anyone who accepted his teaching and that of the great prophets in general” (*EXP*),<sup>8</sup> and so some conservatives accept that Lamentations was composed entirely by Baruch. A reliable interpretation of the text should not insist upon Jeremianic authorship,<sup>9</sup> as we cannot be entirely certain who finally authored these laments

---

<sup>1</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1065.

<sup>2</sup> David J.A. Clines, “Lamentations,” in *ECB*, 617.

<sup>3</sup> Dillard and Longman, 304.

<sup>4</sup> Delbert R. Hillers, “Lamentations, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:138.

<sup>5</sup> “Jeremiah wrote the book that is called by his name, the book of Kings, and Lamentations” (b.*Bava Batra* 15a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>6</sup> S.K. Soderlund, “Lamentations,” in *ISBE*, 3:65.

<sup>7</sup> L.E.H. Stephens-Hodge, “Lamentations,” in *NBCR*, 659; Wick Broomall, “Lamentations,” in *NIDB*, 580.

<sup>8</sup> H.L. Ellison, “Lamentations,” in *EXP*, 6:696.

<sup>9</sup> Dillard and Longman, 304.

or compiled them together. The text should be dated sometime in the mid-to-late Sixth Century B.C.E., but even conservatives are not agreed whether it was written at the beginning, during, or at the end of the Babylonian exile.

Liberal theologians primarily lean to the laments being composed sometime after the Babylonian exile. All liberals favor an anonymous authorship of all of Lamentations, and concede that it may have been written from those among the priestly classes. Liberals severely doubt any kind of genuine Jeremianic involvement in Lamentations,<sup>10</sup> and make light of the fact that the Jewish book order places it separate from the Book of Jeremiah.<sup>11</sup> Liberals will often attribute some changes in style throughout Lamentations to a plurality of voices being used in compiling the text,<sup>12</sup> and argue that the ideas in Lamentations do not easily align with what is seen in Jeremiah.<sup>13</sup> Conservatives point out that this is not an argument against Jeremianic involvement because the author of Lamentations is addressing a new situation that the Book of Jeremiah does not portray.<sup>14</sup>

A few radical liberals of the past proposed that the laments did not involve the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, but rather the Second Century B.C.E. siege of Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>15</sup> Today, however, some liberals are moving to the opposite side of the spectrum, in that “there is no strong reason to suppose that more than one person was responsible for these poems” (*EDB*),<sup>16</sup> and “have tended to view the book more holistically” (Dillard and Longman).<sup>17</sup> More evidence is seen to support Jeremianic authorship or involvement in Lamentations than what stands against it.<sup>18</sup>

The Hebrew text of Lamentations is in a relatively good state of preservation.<sup>19</sup> There are no significant deviations between the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint,<sup>20</sup> although the preservation of the LXX does demonstrate some issues. It is likely that the LXX translators used a different Hebrew source text than the present MT.<sup>21</sup>

The text of the Book of Lamentations is very poetic. The first, second, fourth, and fifth laments all contain 22 verses, reflecting the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Lamentations follows a distinct meter.<sup>22</sup> Lamentations is not unique in that there are other laments in Scripture, but is unique in that it is the only book of the Tanach exclusively devoted to laments. Many have viewed Jeremiah or Baruch as the one lamenting, but today a personified Jerusalem is now being suggested among interpreters.<sup>23</sup> There are definitely

---

<sup>10</sup> N.K. Gottwald, “Lamentations, Book of,” in *IDB*, 3:61, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Delbert R. Hillers, “Lamentations, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:138.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Grossberg, “Lamentations,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1587.

<sup>13</sup> Soderlund, “Lamentations,” in *ISBE*, 3:65.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1069.

<sup>15</sup> Gottwald, “Lamentations, Book of,” in *IDB*, 3:62; Stephens-Hodge, in *NBCR*, 659.

<sup>16</sup> F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Lamentations, Book of,” in *EDB*, 785.

<sup>17</sup> Dillard and Longman, 306.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1070.

<sup>19</sup> Hillers, “Lamentations, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:140.

<sup>20</sup> Ellison, in *EXP*, 6:699.

<sup>21</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1071.

<sup>22</sup> Soderlund, “Lamentations,” in *ISBE*, 3:66-67; Hillers, “Lamentations, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:139-140.

<sup>23</sup> Dillard and Longman, 306.

parallels that exist between Lamentations and other Ancient Near Eastern texts that lament the fall of cities. These texts include: the Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur, Lamentation Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur, and Lamentation Over the Destruction of Nippur.<sup>24</sup>

Lamentations is traditionally read during the Hebrew month of Av, particularly on the Ninth of Av to remember the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 B.C.E. (cf. Jeremiah 41:5; Zechariah 7:3-5; 8:19) and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.<sup>25</sup> The style of Lamentations plays a very important role in the development of Jewish liturgical prayer.<sup>26</sup> Lamentations is also a text that is commonly employed by Orthodox Jews praying regularly at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. In Roman Catholic tradition, Lamentations is often read during Holy Week to remember the sufferings and death of Yeshua the Messiah.<sup>27</sup>

Lamentations forces its readers to remember the judgment of God and the pain that the Southern Kingdom had to endure for its disobedience. The text of Lamentations was clearly compiled to remind people of their duties before the Lord and how He uses human agents like the Babylonians to accomplish His ends. Lamentations would have been used on the part of the Southern Kingdom exiles to express some remorse for what they let happen, but also includes a message of hope for the repentant.

When reading Lamentations today, one often asks whether the worldview of today's Christianity is substantially different from those who originally encountered its message. Does Lamentations minister to those who face calamity in today's world? The Book of Lamentations largely focuses on corporate suffering in a similar way that the Book of Job focuses on individual suffering.<sup>28</sup> Common Jewish views of Lamentations have viewed the text with great profundity, given the great deal of suffering that the Jewish people have had to experience throughout history.<sup>29</sup> Repentance is the way to demonstrate thanksgiving for God's faithfulness,<sup>30</sup> because "His compassion is greater than his anger (3:31-33...)" (Dillard and Longman).<sup>31</sup>

Presently, Lamentations is not a book of the Tanach that often receives a great deal of attention from today's Messianics. Some will read Lamentations in conjunction with the month of Av, but most do not. Future Messianic examinations of Lamentations need to consider its relationship to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the issues that its original recipients/audience faced. Likewise, subjects that Lamentations forces us to consider include corporate suffering, the necessity of repentance, and the need to minister to the hurting. What kind of suffering does today's Messianic movement actually face? Do we recognize the suffering of others in the worldwide Body of Messiah beyond our Messianic community?

---

<sup>24</sup> Dillard and Longman, 307; Dobbs-Allsopp, "Lamentations, Book of," in *EDB*, 785.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Grossberg, "Lamentations," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1589.

<sup>26</sup> Gottwald, "Lamentations, Book of," in *IDB*, 3:63.

<sup>27</sup> N.K. Gottwald, "Lamentations," in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1141.

<sup>28</sup> Dillard and Longman, 311.

<sup>29</sup> Grossberg, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1587.

<sup>30</sup> Clines, in *ECB*, 618.

<sup>31</sup> Dillard and Longman, 312.

**Bibliography**

- Broomall, Wick. "Lamentations," in *NIDB*, pp 579-580.
- Clines, David J.A. "Lamentations," in *ECB*, pp 617-622.
- Dillard, Raymond B., and Tremper Longman III. "Lamentations," in *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 303-312.
- Dobbs-Allsopp, F.W. "Lamentations, Book of," in *EDB*, pp 785-787.
- Ellison, H.L. "Lamentations," in *EXP*, 6:695-733.
- Gottwald, N.K. "Lamentations, Book of," in *IDB*, 3:61-63.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Lamentations," in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, pp 1141-1152.
- Grossberg, Daniel. "Lamentations," in *Jewish Study Bible*, pp 1587-1602.
- Harrison, R.K. "The Book of Lamentations," in *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1065-1071.
- Hilliers, Delbert R. "Lamentations, Book of," in *ABD*, 4:137-141.
- Soderlund, S.K. "Lamentations," in *ISBE*, 3:65-68.
- Stephens-Hodge, L.E.H. "Lamentations," in *NBCR*, pp 659-663.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON LAMENTATIONS:

- 1. What feature or stanza of Lamentations' poetry hit you the hardest as its author was crying over Jerusalem's fall? Have you ever cried out to God in a similar way?**
- 2. In spite of the great sinfulness of Judah and Jerusalem, how significant is it that the author appeals to God's mercy and compassion?**
- 3. What lessons might today's Messianic community learn by listening to the message of Lamentations? (What specific lessons could be learned about prayer and intercession from Lamentations?)**

## REFLECTION ON LAMENTATIONS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Lamentations:*