

Jerusalem Weeps (Lamentations 1)

Background

Lamentations contains five related laments about the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC. They appear to have been written by an eye-witness, probably by Jeremiah, though the author is not explicitly named. The first four laments are written as acrostics (i.e. each verse begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet).

These poems form the background to the book of Jeremiah or, rather, they show the outcome of the book. Jerusalem was destroyed because God's people refused to listen to God's word.

Questions

Lamentations chapter 1 divides into two interwoven sections. In verses 1-11 Jeremiah describes Jerusalem's devastation; in verses 12-22 Jerusalem herself speaks. These two sections combine to give a vivid description of Jerusalem's distress, a distress that was deeply felt by Jeremiah himself.

- What afflictions has Jerusalem suffered? v1-6
- What do the other nations think of her? v7-11
- Who has brought these afflictions on her and why? v5, 8, 12-16, 18a, 22b
- Who is left to comfort Jerusalem? v2, 9, 17, 21
- Who is the only one who can help her? v9b, 11b, 20-22

Application

There seemed to be no hope for Jerusalem. But, after seventy years, God brought his people back from exile and Jerusalem was rebuilt. Now God is building a New Jerusalem, consisting of all who trust in his Son (Rev 21-22).

When we are faced by difficult circumstances, we must cry out to God. If we have faith in Jesus Christ, he will certainly have compassion on us.

Features of Hebrew Poetry

Hebrew Poetry is characterised by *terseness*, a high degree of structure and *figurative language*.¹

- **Terseness** means that poetry uses the minimum number of words to convey its meaning. For example, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people" (Lam 1:1) neatly expresses the effect of four thousand six hundred people being carried into exile by the Babylonians (Jer 52:30).
- **Structure** means that the text is written in lines and stanzas, rather than sentences and paragraphs. Each line usually consists of two or three sub-lines (known as cola). These sub-lines are meant to be considered together.

For example, Lam 1:1 contains three lines, each consisting of two sub-lines:

Line 1:	How lonely sits the city that was full of people!
Line 2:	How like a widow is she who was great among the nations!
Line 3:	The princess among the provinces has become a slave!

Notice how in each case the second sub-line completes the thought of the first.

Another feature of Hebrew poetry is the frequent use of acrostics (i.e. each group of lines begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet). In our example, the first line begins with aleph, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

- **Figurative language** is used in Hebrew poetry as it is in English poetry. The most common types of figurative language are *simile* (a comparison between two things that resemble each other in some way), *metaphor* (a comparison without the use of *like* or *as*) and *personification* (an impersonal thing is represented as personal).

For example in Lam 1:1, Jerusalem is compared to a widow and a slave.

¹ These notes have been adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005)