

### **Lamentations, Book of**

- I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
- II. Judaism
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#### **I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament**

The biblical book of Lamentations consists of five songs which deal with the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, not so much as an historical event but rather as a theological problem. By including the various voices of persons involved, these songs are a complaint about this great loss and also try to answer the question: why has the city-god of Jerusalem abandoned its beloved "Daughter Zion," and where can the pivotal issues that would allow the people to overcome this disaster be found.

The discourse is structured with recourse to prophetic literature; particularly Jeremiah, Isaiah, the early prophets of doom, and many sapiential texts from Psalms and Job. The five songs form a composition in which the first four songs are strongly related to each other by phrases or single words, while the fifth song stands more or less on its own. The first four songs are acrostics; Lam 1, 2, and 4 have one line for each letter, and Lam 3, which is the second most elaborate acrostic in the OT, has three lines beginning with each letter. Lamentations 1, 2 and 4, which together may have been one of the first compositions, begins with the interjection *'ēkā* (Alas!, How!), which gives the book its name in Hebrew tradition.

The oldest manuscripts are from Qumran (3Q3, 4Q111, 5Q6 and 5Q7), altogether there are more than fifty-seven fragments from the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE comprising portions of Lam 1:1–18; 2:5; 3:53–62; 4:5–8, 11–22; 5:1 13, 17. These evince some important variants as well as the great stability of most of the MT. The earliest Greek translation originates from roughly around the same time as the Qumran manuscripts and belongs to the so-called *kaige*-group. It translates the Hebrew almost literally and also provides evidence of great stability in the textual tradition of the MT. In the masoretic tradition, the book of Lamentations is handed down with Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther as the five Megillot. However, the Christian tradition, which is rooted in early Jewish practice and is mostly attested in LXX-Manuscripts, places Lamentations after Jeremiah who is its supposed author.

The early history of research was determined by questions of authorship since the LXX already attributes Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah. The incipit identifies Lamentations as a single song (“this lament” τὸν θρήνον τοῦτον, which produced the latinized label Threni) that Jeremiah sobbingly uttered over Jerusalem after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem laid waste. The meta-textual preamble unambiguously attributes the songs not only to the prophet, but also to the situation immediately after 587/86 BCE, which was taken at face value as an historical event in all five songs. In accordance with this view, the voice describing Jerusalem’s fate, the vicariously suffering voice in Lam 2:11–19, and the man in Lam 3:1 who experienced being trapped in a pit just as Jeremiah had (Lam 3:53, 55, cf. Jer 18:22; 36:6–13) were all considered indications of its authorship. This was strengthened by parallels and even affinity between Lamentations and the book of Jeremiah (cf. Jer 14:17 to Lam 2:11; 3:48–49, Jer 20:7 to Lam 3:14, Jer 8:8 to Lam 1:22, or Jer 8:23 to Lam 2:11, 18; 3:48 etc.). Recent exegesis has de facto begun to distinguish between writing for production purposes and literary authorship (also known in Pseudepigraphy, fictional autobiographies, or role poetry). Within this view, Jeremiah can be seen as an “ideal author” as he was already in the reception process from very early on (LXX, Talmud, Targumim etc.).

The unity of the composition is not revealed by the content, form, or authorship of the five songs, but rather by their canonical compilation. Each song has distinct characteristics: textual, poetic, and theological. Lamentations 1 is characterized by the most explicit personification of Jerusalem, the concentration of various aspects of Zion’s body, the motif of lacking consolation, the confession of guilt, and an impressive representation of emotions. The other nations, which only the first two songs emphasize, have been violent but have been

acting so as instruments of God. In the doxological argument in Lam 1, the affirmation of the presence of God is defended.

In contrast, Lam 2 is the harshest accusation that God is being wicked, a murderer of children, a destroyer of city and land, and a desolator of the people. The variation of terms depicting God’s wrath in Lam 2:1–6 is incomparable not only to the other songs, but also to other communal or individual laments in the HB. God is seen as pitiless, unjust, and violent. No substantiation for God’s seemingly boundless wrath is given in the second song and no justification of God. The accusation in Lam 2 appears to have damaged the character of God, as he is seen to adhere to an ambivalence that is intrinsic to his character. The only solution offered in 1:18 is the demand to address the complaint towards the perpetrator (1:20–22). However, this does not allow the despair and the bitter disappointment to dissipate. God is accused of having murdered the children of Zion, and thus he seems iniquitous and merciless.

This is quite different to the third song in which the speaker overcomes his grief by alluding to the grace formula (Exod 34:6–7). He has experienced comparable affliction (Lam 3:1–18) but does not complain that God is unjust or that his wrath is beyond all measure. As in the book of Job, he justifies the presence of God by affirming God’s responsibility in establishing a superior concept of justice (Lam 3:23–39). The third song is not only the most elaborate acrostic, but also the most theological one with numerous intertextual connections. Being a sapiential reflection with many links to the Psalms, Job, and the Prophets (particularly Jeremiah), its central theological argument is that God’s grace is not exhausted in his righteous wrath and judgment, but rather he renews it every morning (Lam 3:23, 31–32). The paradigmatic speaker of Lam 3 overcomes his depression by the remembrance of the steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness of God, who is most present semantically in the third song. In contrast, the city of Jerusalem and the scenarios of destruction recede in Lam 3. And in addition, a “we” comes into play in Lam 3:40–47 for the first time, which is taken up in the fourth song in Lam 4:17–20 and is the dominant voice in the last song.

The fourth song is characterized by strong, emotional metaphors, which emphasize the harsh contrast between past and present. The vigorous images of hunger, threat, affliction, and destruction return the focus back to the city and its fate, although Jerusalem is not personified as in the first song. The song portrays the current state of Zion theology which has collapsed under the sack and conquest and under which all of the institutions have broken down. The nobility and elites who believed in the distinctiveness of the city and the city-

god are disenchanting by the brutal course of events. Strikingly, the perpetrators are addressed nowhere in the fourth song, although it ends with a positive saying stemming from a “prophetic” or “divine” voice. This assurance may once have formed the end of the *’ēkā*-composition.

The fifth song is not an acrostic; it is not linked intertextually to the former songs; it has no compositional mid-axis like Lam 1, 2, and 4; it does not concentrate on the city; and the speaker is a “we.” The fifth song, which merely focuses on post-war phenomena, has been added to the composition perhaps as late as the 2nd century BCE, although the song itself is much older and has its closest parallels in the Psalms of communal lament and in the Psalms of Asaph. Theologically, the fifth song is a portrayal of chaos: order is upside down and the people are under high afflictive pressure. God is considered capable of ending this punishment; his sovereignty can change the troubled situation. This is underscored by the traditional, rhetorical how-long-question (cf. Ps 13:2; 35:17; 74:10; 80:5 et al.) and the topos of total rejection, which are both strong pleas for deliverance.

Consequently, the formation of the book of Lamentations can be described as follows: Lam 2 is the oldest song, and chronologically the closest text to the destruction of 587/86 BCE. Its accusatory rigorosity towards God is unparalleled in the Psalms, although even this song wants to spur God to relieve affliction and to overcome his wrath. But as with the other songs, the original setting of Lam 2 is not the liturgy performed on the ruins of the temple, but rather the study desks of literati coping with the aftermath of catastrophes. This was done in theological discourses and by sticking to tradition. Lamentations is literature rather than liturgy. Lamentations 1 deliberately reacts to the outrageous accusation against God and justifies his judgment by pointing at Zion’s guilt (Lam 1:18). The first song is composed with reference to and in connection with Lam 2. It is through Lam 1 that the composition becomes an interlocutor with Jeremiah, Isaiah, and many other prophetic texts - this includes the personification of Zion, which is also prominent in these texts. Just as with Lam 1, the fourth song is at the earliest late-exilic, more probably already postexilic. The conquest of Bozra in 553 BCE may already be in the background of Lam 4:22.

In the 4th century BCE, the most elaborate acrostic was composed with at least Lam 1 and Lam 2 in mind, and most probably as a theological centerpiece of the early *’ēkā*-composition. Lamentations 3 introduces approved tradition into the theodicy discourse; it draws on the priestly creation account, on the prophets, and on sapiential literature, particularly the Psalms and Job. As in the book of Job, there is no solution or satisfactory explanation of-

fered for the harm. However, what is given instead is the admonition that God’s justice exceeds human understanding, and that in comparison to his grace his wrath is only one side of his character - and in the end, less distinct. In this way the complaints of Lam 1, 2 and 4 are not rebuked, but rather seen as a model of coping with incomprehensible misery. The accusation against God is legitimate, but encapsulated within theological reflection. The paradigmatic prayer, who overcomes grief by accepting it, becomes a role-model without neglecting the lasting repercussions of distress. The fifth song, which had already existed separately from the early post-exilic period, was added to the composition to make the number of songs five in total, just like the Pentateuch and the five books of the psalter. By adding Lam 5, the third song becomes the center of the composition. The redactional process has shifted the focus from the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem in 597 and 587/86 BCE to more general situations of hardship and to theological discourse. With respect to theology, the five songs resound with the resilience of God-relationships in times of affliction: ranging between bitter complaint, self-reflection, renewed hope, and doxological approval.

The book of Lamentations became a model which offers a way for believers to cope with communal distress. Lamentations 3 strengthens the role of the individual in the process of coping with anguish on the one hand, and on the other hand it strengthens the role of tradition in overcoming constrictions in the understanding of God’s wrath. Judging from the composition, there is much more restoration than destruction in the perspective of Lamentations.

Generally speaking, it is striking how sparsely the five songs focus on the concrete situation of the siege, conquest, and the destruction of the city and its temple. They are characterized by a lack of historical circumstances and of the specific condition of the city and its destruction. They can rather be read as a general lament concerning the destruction of the city. In this respect, they have much in common with Sumerian canonical compositions regarding the destruction of Ur, which evince several striking parallels to the book of Lamentations in their notions, motifs, and expressions. Even the technique of including several voices of lament in the composition is a parallel to ancient Near Eastern laments. However, the book of Lamentations cannot be seen as directly dependent upon these literary forms. Although these compositions may have been known by the authors, it is more likely that cultural proximity influenced the thinking and coping strategies exhibited towards the experience of abandonment by the city-god which has parallels in both types of literature. Both try to find new avenues in times of restoration after a great loss.

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