

Analysis of Lamentations

General

Lamentations is the poetic book that provides a glimpse into the emotion of the people who experienced the exile. This lament of Jeremiah does not simply capture the response of the people to the horrific events of the time of the exile but “expresses the emotion following the discovery that the power behind the carnage was ultimately not the Babylonian war machine—it was God Himself” (Dillard and Longman, p. 303).

Authorship

Like so many other books of the Old Testament where authorship is not stated explicitly, many scholars view Lamentations as an anonymous work (Dillard and Longman, p. 304). However Childs states “there is strong tradition found in the LXX, Vulgate, and Targums that Jeremiah was also the author of the book of Lamentations” (p. 592). Childs notes that although this traditional viewpoint was challenged in the beginning of the eighteenth century, it has continued to garner modern supporters (p. 592-593). This analysis holds to the view that Jeremiah is the author of Lamentations.

Date

Because of the graphic details of destruction of Jerusalem, there is “vast agreement” to the relative date of Lamentations. Dillard and Longman date the book within 75 years of the destruction of Jerusalem, 587-586 B.C. (p. 304).

Original Audience

The original audience would have been the nation of Israel soon after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians.

Key Interpretive Issues¹

Key issues of Lamentations are: 1) recognizing the acrostic structure of the book, 2) recognizing the possibility of Hebrew meter [qinah, 3+2], 3) recognizing the use of poetry to capture the depths of emotions present at such a tragic time, 4) recognizing the connection between Lamentations and Deuteronomy, 5) to appreciate that God keeps His promises to bless or, in the case of Lamentations, to curse.

Summary/Purpose Statement

The book of Lamentations is a graphic reminder to Israel of the result of her sin against God. God in His fierce anger turned Jerusalem and its inhabitants over to her enemies. God used Israel’s enemies as the rod of His anger. The divine destruction was ruthless and complete.

To comfort His people in their desperate situation Jeremiah poetically rehearses for his audience that God was the one who justly brought His judgment upon His city according to His promise because of their sin. But in the midst of God’s anger there was hope that God’s mercy would spring anew when God looked down upon His people’s tragic plight once again. The readers of Lamentations could hope in a sovereign God who would keep His promises (Deut 28-32).

¹ I’m very grateful for and indebted to Dr. Mark McGinniss for his help and insights.

Outline of Lamentations²

- I. A lament for a once grand city who forgot her God (1:1-22).
 - A. The once-great city is laid to waste (1:1-10).
 - B. Jeremiah laments the destruction and lack of comfort (1:11-22).

- II. The reason for the lament is explained (2:1-22).
 - A. God has brought this destruction on the city (2:1-22).
 - B. Jeremiah laments that the sin of the people has caused God to keep His word (2:11-22).

- III. A lament because God is against me (3:1-66).
 - A. God is my enemy but I still hope in Him (3:1-24).
 - B. The Lord is good to those who seek Him (3:23-38).
 - C. Let us repent and return to God (3:39-47).
 - D. A lament for God to deal with our enemies (3:48-66).

- IV. The reason for the Lord's anger is explained (4:17-22).
 - A. Our sin was very great (4:1-16).
 - B. We were punished because of our sin (4:17-22).

- V. A lament to God to remember (5:1-22).
 - A. God, see our reproach (5:1-18).
 - B. God, restore us as of old (5:19-22).

Theological Issues

Some of the theological aspects included in Lamentations are: God's character (righteous anger and wrath, just judgment, faithfulness, grace, covenant love, mercy), man's disobedience, discipline and anguish over sin, God keeps His promises, human suffering, mourning/laments, a call to confession and repentance then forgiveness.

Theological Application

Lamentation speaks to God's people today by reminding them that God's mercy and patience are not to be taken as license to think, act upon, or say whatever one desires. God will keep His promise to discipline His people for the purpose of turning them from their sin and back to Himself.

² It is difficult to subdivide the main points of Jeremiah possibly due to the tightness of the acrostic poem. But in chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 there is a change in point of view (POV), which is used here as a division marker. It is interesting that all of chapter 5 is in 1st Person POV.