

LITERARY OVERVIEW

- **Author:** Traditionally Jeremiah, though no explicit reference in the text of the book. The LXX (3rd cent. B.C.) names Jeremiah in the preface is followed by the Latin Vulgate (4th cent. A.D.), and the Talmud (3rd-6th cent. A.D.). Some suggest a multiple author theory based on varying styles between the chapters, but there is enough similarity to suggest a single author.
- The author is writing from a “1st hand witness” point of view, and seems to be describing things from the perspective of one who experienced the devastating fall of Jerusalem.
- The writing would certainly be in line with the depth of sympathy and passion that we saw in the character of Jeremiah.
- **Title:** In the Hebrew Bible, this is called the “Ekaḥ” (אֵיכָה = ekah “how”, as in 1:1, 2:1, 4:1).
- **Date:** Some time after 587 B.C. and the fall of the capital city of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem.
- **Setting:** Jerusalem, the “city of God” has fallen as a result of God’s judgment on the people’s sin. It has fallen to the armies of Babylon after a siege which brought about immense suffering.
- **Form/Genre:** 5 funeral poems (elegies), which lament and express grief for the devastation brought upon the people. In the Hebrew Bible, it does not come after Jeremiah (in prophets), but rather in the wisdom literature.
- They are acrostics, using the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to give form to deep emotions. It would take discipline and skill to create these kinds of poems, and it would aid the people in memorizing them (a common practice among an oral culture).
- The literary form of lamentation reminds us that things are all happy and easy in the life of faith. It legitimizes the creation of literature, stories, songs, and art that are dark with sometimes only a glimmer of hope (think of “Fiddler on the Roof”). These have been called “melancholy dirges for a ruined society.” They are like singing a song of mourning over one who has died.
- **Main Characters:** God, the author (Jeremiah?), the people of Jerusalem. Also in the background are the Babylonians.
- **Purpose:** To lament the destruction of Jerusalem and invoke sadness from the readers and to bring into sympathy with those who suffered. It is also to cause the readers (then and now) to hate sin and desire to avoid judgment from God.
- While Job primarily addresses the issue of suffering in “innocence”, Lamentations is about suffering chastisement from the Lord when it is deserved.
- In one sense, the book justifies Jeremiah’s ministry of almost 5 decades as he warned of judgment and extended God’s offer of grace. But there is no sense of superiority or “I told you so” attitude, but a continued looking to the Lord in hope for mercy for His people.
- One of the later uses of the book seems to have been the remembrance of the fall of Jerusalem, the opposite of a “celebration”, used to mourn and remember God’s judgment of sin. It may have been actually sung congregationally during these remembrances.
- The laments can be helpful to see what how we are to recognize God’s chastisement, confess, and repent from sin.
- There is a “day of the Lord” motif which is found in the prophets (Joel 2:1-2 Zephaniah 1:14-16), and this collection of poems the writer is reminding us that all of this has happened under the sovereignty of God. It is God who afflicted, not merely a group of pagans that happened to gain great military power. When there was judgment, they were supposed to ask the question “what have we done?” (a question which is not typically asked in our day by leaders).
- There are three major reasons that the author gives as to why Jerusalem fell: (1.) the peoples’ sin – 1:18, (2.) the rejection of God’s Word through the prophets (2:8, 14, 17), and (3.) their political and religious leaders leading them astray (4:13).
- **Challenges:** To emotionally enter into the devastation and lament without losing hope. To do this, it is necessary to temper the whole work with the brightest portion, 3:22-24. Remember that these are 5 separate works (though certainly thematically connected).

OUTLINE¹

- I. **First Lament (ch.1) – “Jerusalem in Her Desolation”**
- II. **Second Lament (ch.2) – “The Desolation Caused by Divine Judgment”**
- III. **Third Lament (ch.3) – “Jeremiah Moves from Sorrow to Hope”**
- IV. **Fourth Lament (ch.4) – “The Desolation Bought by Judah’s Sin”**
- V. **Fifth Lament (ch.5) – “A Cry for Mercy”**

¹ *Ryken’s Bible Handbook*, Tyndale House Publishers.