**The Book of Lamentations**

**Dr. Thomas M. Strouse**

**THE TITLE**

The initial adverb *‘eycah* (*“How”*) of the *Book of Lamentations* is the biblical exclamation of lamenting (cf. Isa. 1:21; Jer. 48:17; Lam. 1:1; 2:1; 4:1, 2). Certainly, the context of the book focuses on the funeral dirge for the destroyed city of Jerusalem. It contains five groupings of poetic laments for the destruction of Jerusalem. Contextually, it fits canonically behind the *Book of Jeremiah* but it is placed in the *Tanak* in the *Megilloth* (scrolls) of the *Kethubim*: [*Song of Songs*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_of_Songs)*, the* [*Book of Ruth*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Ruth)*, the* [*Book of Lamentations*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Lamentations)*,* [*Ecclesiastes*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastes), and the [*Book of Esther*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Esther). The *LXX* referred to *Lamentations* as *Threnoi of Jeremiah*. Jerome added the subtitle in the *Vulgate* as *Id est Lamentationes Jeremiae Prophetae.*

The verb !Wq *qun* (8x) means “to lament” or *“mourning women”* (Jer. 9:17) and the cognate noun hn"yqi *qiynah* (18x) means *“lamentation*(*s*).” David lamented over Saul (II Sam. 1:17), Jeremiah lamented for Josiah (II Chr. 35:25), the Jews lamented over Jerusalem (Jer. 7:29), the mountains lamented (Jer. 9:10), women taught daughters to lament (Jer. 9:20), Ezekiel’s scroll had lamentations (Ezk. 2:10); Ezekiel lamented for princes (Ezk. 19:1) and Tyrus (Ezk. 27:2) and Pharaoh (Ezk. 32:2), Amos lamented over Israel (Amos 5:1), and the LORD would turn the *“songs”* of Israel into *“lamentations”* (Amos 8:10). Although the *Book of Lamentations* does not contain the verb or noun, it certainly fits the nature of the words, and indeed was the greatest example of divine lament over the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

**THE AUTHOR/DATE**

Obviously the author and date are connected in the writing of the *Book of Lamentations*. Though the book has no entitled author, early Jewish and Christian tradition posited Jeremiah as the author. One should consider the following arguments. 1) Jeremiah was well qualified to be the author since he lived before, during, and after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. 2) Jeremiah was a writing prophet, historian, and poet, as Scripture testified, saying, *“And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah: and all the singing men and the singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations to this day, and made them an ordinance in Israel: and, behold, they are written in the lamentations”* (II Chr. 35:25). 3) Characteristic of the writing of Jeremiah was his expression the *“daughter of,”* usually referring to the *“daughter of my people”* (Jer. 4:11, *et al*), or the *“daughter of Zion”* (Jer. 6:2, *et al*), which expressions occur in the *Book of Jeremiah* (19x) and in the *Book of Lamentations* (18x). 4) Jeremiah was the weeping and lamenting prophet of Jerusalem (Jer. 3:21; 9:10; 31:9, 15, 16; 41:6; 48:5, 32; 50:4). This exegete will consider Jeremiah as the author of the *Book of Lamentations* written soon after the fall of the city in 586 BC.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**THE STYLE**

The *Book of Lamentations* contains five poems, the first four as acrostic, dealing with the devastation of the city of Jerusalem. Each of the four poems constitutes a chapter with the twenty-two letters either in singular or three-fold order (Chapter Three), starting each verse with the succeeding consonant of the Hebrew alphabet (or the *‘Aleph-Beth*). The acrostic style occurs also in Pss. 9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; and 145 in varying degrees of perfection.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the classic work of David, he employed both the acrostic (*‘aleph, beth, gimel*…) and the alliteration (*‘aleph, ‘aleph, ‘aleph*…) in the largest piece of poetry, Psalm 119:1-176. He started with *‘aleph* and ended with *tau*, alliterating the eight verses for each Hebrew consonant in the Hebrew *‘Aleph-Beth*. See the following (right to left): t f r q c p [ s n m l k yjxz wh dg b a. Basically, the use of the acrostic was to describe the A-Z (*Alpha and Omega* [Rev. 1:8]) of lamenting in sorrow and grief for Judah, Jerusalem and the Jews! Furthermore, the meter of the five pieces of the poetic literature was the cadence used in funeral dirges! Poems one, two, and four are each twenty-two line acrostics. Poem three, the middle piece of the chiasm of dirges, consists of sixty-six lines, using every three lines for one consonant in successive order. Poem five has twenty-two lines but with no acrostic. This brokenness in the fifth poem suggests things out of order or chaotic and destructive, as in the fall of Jerusalem. Also, as clever as is the skillful craftiness of acrostic poems, Jeremiah wanted to move the reader away from focusing on the stylish form of the message to focusing on the poignant tragedy expressed in the message of the *Book of Lamentations*.

**THE BACKGROUND**

Jehovah chose His People the Jews (Gen. 9:26; Ex. 19:5-6; Amos 3:2), who spoke the heavenly language Hebrew,[[3]](#footnote-3) and gave them the ideal piece of real estate as their Land (Gen. 12:7 *et al*). He instructed them in the Law (Dt. 33:2) and set them up for great spiritual blessing. He brought along spiritual prophets (Jer. 7:1 ff.) to keep them in obedience and blessing (Dt. 28:1-14). However, the LORD warned His chosen nation of severe judgment if the people rebelled against Him and His Law. Indeed, Israel developed a history of rebellion, and Jehovah sent judgment in the form of the surrounding nations (Dt. 28:48-53) diminishing and ultimately destroying Israel by the Assyrians (722 BC) and Judah by the Babylonians (586 BC). Jeremiah warned and Judah rejected. The city of Jerusalem and the Solomonic Temple were destroyed and the Jewish people were killed, enslaved, exiled, or fled to Egypt (II Ki. 24-25; Jer. 39-40). The “weeping prophet” (Jer. 9:1, 18; 13:17; 14:17; and 31:16) constantly wept over the tragedy and wrote his *“Book of Lamentations.”*

**THE OUTLINE**

**A. The Desolation of the Place (Lam. 1:1-22)**

**B. The Demolition of the Place (Lam. 2:1-22)**

**C. The Desperation of the Prophet (Lam. 3:1-66)**

**B.’ The Despair of the People (Lam. 4:1-22)**

**A.’ The Deliverance for the People (Lam. 5:1-22)**

**CHAPTER ONE: A. THE DESOLATION OF THE PLACE (LAM. 1:1-22)**

**A The Desolation of the Place (Lam. 1:1-22)**

**1. The Widowed Jerusalem (vv. 1:1-10)**

a. Her Solitary (v. 1)

b. Her Sorrow (v. 2)

c. Her Servitude (v. 3)

d. Her Sighs (vv. 4-7)

e. Her Sins (vv. 8-9)

f. Her Sanctuary (v. 10)

**2. The Wrath of Jehovah (vv. 11-12)**

**1.’ The Wrecked Jerusalem (vv.13-22)**

**1. The Widowed Jerusalem (1:1-10) > cf. II Ki. 24:17-25:20; Jer. 39:9-14; 40:1-4**

**a. Her Solitary (v. 1) > *‘aleph* > *“how”***

\*Jeremiah knew the greatness of Jerusalem, especially under Josiah (II Ki. 22:1; Jer. 36:1 ff.)

\*He likened the full city to a solitary city, once great (center of religion and commerce) but now a widow; the *“princess”* (*sarah* [5x]) has turned into a widow, once powerful (David ruled over Moab and Edom) and now a servant (Egypt and Assyria).

**b. Her Sorrow (v. 2) > *beth “weepeth”***

\*The ex-princess *“weepeth sore”* (verb and inf. absolute) because she is deserted by her “lovers” (nations and idols), such as Egypt (Isa. 36:6; Jer. 22:20).

\*The treacherous Jews received treacherousness from the nations.

**c. Her Servitude (v. 3) > *gimel* > *“captivity”***

\*Judah purposely went to Egypt to escape the Babylonians (Jer. 43:4-7). She left God’s will and found no rest (Dt. 28:65)! > Cf. Ps. 48:2; cf. Lam. 2:15.

\*Everywhere the judged Judah went, she was **in straits (distresses).**

**d. (1) Her Sighs (vv. 4-7) > (v. 4)** ***daleth >“ways”***

\*The crowded *ways* (*derec* > d-r-c > t-r-c = direction, truck) to Jerusalem no longer have any pilgrims!

\*No feasts, no gates, no place for priests or virgins (looking for husbands), and no joy!

**d. (2) Her Sighs (vv. 4-7) >** **(v. 5)** ***he > “are”***

\*The Jews’ enemies are their *“head”* (rosh) and they prosper.

\*The sins of Judah brought affliction and her children are captives.

**d. (3) Her Sighs (vv. 4-7)** > **v. 6 *waw > “and”***

\*No beauty in the ruins of Zion!

\*The princes fled like a deer and are powerless (Zedekiah [II Ki. 25:4; Jer. 39:4]).

**d. (4) Her Sighs (vv. 4-7) > v. 7 *zayin > “remembered”***

\*The Jews of Jerusalem remembered her days of judgment!

\*Her memories focused on miseries, no help, and mockery of divine sabbaths (Gen. 2:2-3)!

**e (1) Her Sins (v. 8-9) > v. 8 *cheth’ > grievously >*** the honoured princess (v. 1) is now naked!

**e (2) Her Sins (v. 8-9) > v. 9 *teth > filthiness*** > the princess’ *“skirts”* (*shul* > shawl) have been removed (Jer. 13:22). Jerusalem has been raped!

**f. Her Sanctuary (v. 10) > *jod*[*t*] *“hand”***

\*The princess’ pleasantries have been plundered by the hand of the Babylonians!

\*The private sanctuary of the Temple invaded by pagans (cf. Dt. 23:2-3; Ezk. 44:7, 9).

**2. The Wrath of Jehovah > *“See, O LORD”* (vv. 11-12) > (Mt. 23-24: Jews have nothing > LOF)!**

**a. The Despair of the Prophet Jeremiah (v. 11)** > *caph > “all”*

\*The collective sigh of the survivors and Jeremiah over the wrath of God > II Ki. 25:3

\*In famine they traded valuables for bread. He was silent to their piteous cry > Dt. 28:53; Jer. 38:9; 52:6.

**b. The Dejection of the Prophet Jeremiah (v. 12)** > *lamed > “nothing”*

\*Outsiders who passed by gave no sympathy to the faithful prophet who prophesied devastating disaster for the rebels. He was mocked and rejected (Ps. 22:6-8).

\*Jeremiah suffered along with the people in hunger and pain. Ezekiel and Daniel were deported early in 605 BC > Rom. 14:7.

**1.’ The Wrecked Jerusalem (1:13-22) >** Jeremiah represented Jerusalem and pre-figured Jesus!

**a. By Fire (v. 13)** > *mem > “from above”*

*\**Jeremiah, like the people suffered in the burning city (v. 13a) > II Ki. 25:9.

\*Nets were thrown and the populace was dissuaded (v. 13b) > Ps. 66:11.

\*Weakness and faintness hammered the people relentlessly (v. 13c) > Jer. 44:6.

**b. By Yoke (v. 14) >** *nun* > *“is bound”*

*\**The figure of the yoke place around the neck represents the judgment of the Lord > Prov. 5:22.

\*The sins of Jerusalem have caused her to fall before the enemy as the Lord > Jer. 32:3, 5.

**c. (1) By Military** **(vv. 15-17) > (v. 15) > *samec > “trodden under foot”>***the mighty men and the young men > Jer. 6:11.

**c. (2) By Military (vv. 15-17) > (v. 16) > *`ayin > “for”*** *>* Jeremiah wept > Jer. 9:1; Jn. 11:35.

**c. (3) By Military (vv. 15-17) > (v. 17) > *pe > “spreadeth forth”***

*\**Jerusalem opened hands to receive help > I Tim. 2:8.

\*Her lovers around her with no help > Lam. 1:2.

\*The Princess became a Widow and now a ceremonially Unclean Woman > Lev. 15:19-24.

**d. By Judgment (v. 18)** **> *tzadi >“righteous”***

*\**The nature of Jehovah is righteousness (Ex. 9:27; II Chr. 12:6; Pss. 129:4; 145:17)

\*The confession of sin still brings consequences. You can choose your sin but not your consequences > Ps. 32:5; Rom. 6:23.

**e. By Isolation (v. 19) > *qoph > “called”***

*\**Where were the nations and deities that were allies? (Hos. 2:5)

\*Where were false priests and elders who starved for lack of bread? (cf. Jer. 2:8).

**f. By Sword (v. 20) > *resh > “behold”***

*\**Behold (*re’eh*) or see > an imperative! Ps. 54:4.

*\**I’m in trouble with distress and death! > Jer. 10:18.

**g. By Mockery (v. 21)** **> *shin > “heard”***

*\**The enemies have *“heard”* *(shama`)* > Ps. 31:13

\*They were *“glad”* (*sus)* in their mockery of our calamity > Obad. 1:12

**h. By Discouragement (v. 22) *tau > “let come”***

\*Let judgment come upon my enemies (Ps. 137:8-9).

\*My heart is faint and I am heartbroken (Mt. 23:37). > **Eccl. 7:4**

1. German rationalist H. von der Hardt (1712) postulated the inane arguments that the different style (acrostic) and different vocabulary are not those of the prophet Jeremiah. Ultimately, Jehovah wrote the *Book of Lamentations* through His chosen vessel whom He prepared—Jeremiah the Weeping Prophet and Acrostic Poet! The LORD is not limited in writing style and vocabulary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Solomon’s mother (Prov. 31:1), Bathsheba wrote a beautiful acrostic poem revealing the *“virtuous woman”* in Prov. 31:10-31. No doubt as she matured into a godly wife and queen, she wanted the best wife for her son, King Solomon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. That Hebrew was the mother tongue is posited along four lines of argument. First, the puns, and there are many in the Hebrew text of Genesis 1-11, only work in Hebrew and not in any other ancient language. Second, Eber was the last patriarch to speak the original language (Gen. 10:21-25) before the Tower of Babel, and he was the ancestor to the Hebrews who spoke Hebrew (Gen. 14:13). Third, Zephaniah predicted the return to the *“pure language”* to *“call upon the name of the LORD* (*Jehovah*)*”* (Zeph. 3:9). Fourth, the only option to these biblical arguments is the untenable position that Hebrew supposedly “evolved” out of the Canaanite language. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)