

Lamentations

1. Introduction – The judgment of God threatened by Deuteronomy and announced by the prophets had fallen upon Israel and Judah because of their sins. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed, and the people had been taken into exile to Babylon. Lamentations expresses the despair and hopelessness experienced by the people as a result of God turning against them.
2. Author and date – Jeremiah is traditionally identified as the author. However, the book itself does not identify the author, and nowhere else in Scripture is Jeremiah identified as the author. Jeremiah certainly could have written it; he lived during the time addressed by the book. However, there is no clear evidence that allows us to identify the author with any confidence. This is not a significant problem; the interpretation of the book does not depend on identifying the author. The book was written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, which occurred in 587 B.C. Due to the level and freshness of emotion expressed in the book, most scholars date the book shortly after this event. Thus, it is a product of the exilic period.
3. Historical background – The background of this event is rather confusing, so we lay it out here in some detail. King Josiah had instituted widespread reforms, but he did not succeed in gaining the hearts of the people. He died in battle against Egypt in 609 B.C., and his son Jehoahaz became king. Judah was caught between the two major powers of the day, Egypt and Babylon. Pharaoh Neco extended his power into Judah and deposed Jehoahaz to Egypt after Jehoahaz was on the throne only three months. Neco appointed Eliakim, Jehoahaz's brother, to be king, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim paid tribute to Neco; during his reign, Jehoiakim had many conflicts with the prophet Jeremiah, including cutting up and throwing into a fire a scroll containing Jeremiah's prophecy. In 605, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated the Egyptians. The next year he returned to Judah and made Jehoiakim his vassal. Soon after, Jehoiakim turned to Egypt for help, provoking Babylon to invade Judah in 598. Jehoiakim had died before the Babylonians arrived; his son Jehoiachin, only 18 years old, had been made king. Jehoiachin surrendered and was carried off to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle (another of Josiah's sons), as king, and changed his name to Zedekiah. In spite of Jeremiah's counsel from God to submit to Babylon (Jer. 27:1-14), Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon. This act led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587-586. Lamentations pours out the anguish of soul that resulted from God's turning away from them in blessing and turning toward them in anger.
4. Literary character:
 - a. While Lamentations is often read as an individual expression of anguish, it is better understood as a corporate lament, much like many of the Psalms (44, 60, 74, 79, 80). Occasional expressions from an individual are a literary device to communicate the personal nature of their suffering by personifying the people as an individual expressing grief. For example, the man in 3:1-21 is probably best understood as personified Jerusalem.
 - b. Each of the five chapters corresponds to a literary unit. The first four are acrostics (the beginning of each verse or line starting with sequential letters of the Hebrew alphabet).
5. Structure and themes:
 - a. Ch. 1 describes the city from an outside perspective, forsaken and full of distress.
 - b. Ch. 2 focuses on the wrath of God experienced from the perspective of those within.
 - c. Ch. 3 rehearses God's faithfulness even from the perspective of times of great trouble. This section is actually the most hopeful and includes the well-known statement: "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."
 - d. Ch. 4 rehearses the sins of all classes of people who are suffering God's anger.
 - e. Ch. 5 is a prayer for restoration; while not overtly hopeful, the very fact that they are looking to the Lord in their prayers is a sign of confidence in God.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.