

OpenTheo

Lamentations Overview



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

In this overview of the book of Lamentations, Steve Gregg highlights several key features of the text, including its likely authorship by Jeremiah and its inclusion in the Megaloth rather than the prophetic books of the Jewish Bible. Despite its primarily negative tone, the book also contains expressions of hope and faith, with Jeremiah finding hope in the faithfulness and mercy of God. The book's depiction of God emphasizes justice and compassion rather than wrath and anger, and the final prayer in Chapter 5 suggests the possibility of restoration for the Israelites.

Transcript

I believe this will be a relatively, well not only relatively, but quite a short treatment of the book of Lamentations. Obviously much of what would have to be said by way of introduction to Lamentations has already been said in our introduction to Jeremiah. It's the same author writing at the same time about the same events.

So Lamentations, however, is written after the temple was destroyed in 586 BC, but not very much after. Soon enough after that it was still, the emotions were very raw about it. And we know that Jeremiah, some short time after the destruction of the temple, was forced to leave Jerusalem by his countrymen.

They made him go with them to Egypt. And we don't know how long exactly he was in Jerusalem after the temple was destroyed, but not very long. And during that time he would have written the book of Lamentations.

Now the book of Lamentations doesn't say that it was written by Jeremiah. It's actually written anonymously, but there are reasons for knowing that Jeremiah wrote it, which I'll mention in a moment. First I'd like to say that Lamentations is placed in our Bibles among the major prophets.

There are 12 minor prophets in the Old Testament, and there are five books that we call the major prophets. But though there are five books that we call the major prophets, there's only four prophets in that group. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

But Jeremiah has two books. And so his second book, Lamentations, is in the collection in the English Bible called the major prophets. It comes right after Jeremiah and before Ezekiel.

In the Jewish Bible it's not in the prophets, simply because it's not giving a prophecy. There's no denial. The Jews certainly believe that Jeremiah the prophet wrote it.

But that doesn't really place it in the category of prophetic books. In fact, the Jews pretty much believe that prophets wrote all the Old Testament books. But not all of them are prophetic books.

But the idea that prophets wrote them, Moses for example being a prophet, David being a prophet, even Solomon being a prophet, and wrote some of the books that are not prophetic books. But that's how we can say that the Old Testament is the word of God. Because the writers were men who were prophets, who received from God his word and inspiration.

Now, Jeremiah wrote this book, but it's not a book of prophecy. It's a book of laments. In the Jewish Bible it is collected with four other books.

In a collection it's called the Megaloth, or Megaloth. Which means the five scrolls. Now, the Jewish Bible is broken into several subunits.

The most famous being the Torah, the first five books written by Moses. There are the prophets, which are the former prophets and the latter prophets. There are other writings, including Psalms and Proverbs.

And these five books that are the Megaloth, or Megaloth, are a collection to themselves. They include the books of Ruth, Esther, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations. And so in the Jewish Bible, the Hebrew Bible, this book is placed elsewhere.

It's not placed among the prophets. But there is no serious question whether it was written by the prophet Jeremiah. By the way, there is also a Jewish tradition that Jeremiah wrote the books of 1 and 2 Kings.

Which he might have. Some of the chapters in 2 Kings especially are almost the same as some of the material in Jeremiah. And he would have been in the position to write it.

And we don't otherwise know of any writer of 1 and 2 Kings. The books are anonymous. So a Jewish tradition exists that Jeremiah wrote those.

But we won't take time with that. Lamentations is, I think, much more obviously written by Jeremiah. The word Lamentations is the name of the book taken from the Septuagint and the Vulgate.

Now, the Septuagint is the Greek Old Testament. Most of you know, some may not, that the Old Testament was written almost entirely in Hebrew. A few chapters were written in Aramaic.

But almost entirely the book is written in Hebrew. But about three centuries or less before the time of Christ, a bunch of Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt decided they should translate their Hebrew scriptures into Greek. Because Greek was now becoming the lingua franca of the entire empire.

And everybody spoke Greek and fewer and fewer people knew Hebrew. So it's just like modern translators who think that most Americans can't understand King James. They come out with more modern translations because they feel like the language has changed.

Well, certainly the Hebrew scriptures, if they were not being understood well, because people weren't speaking Hebrew much, but Greek was, you could see why the Jews would be motivated to write a Greek text. Now, in the Greek Old Testament, which is called the Septuagint, this book is called Lamentations. And in the Latin Vulgate, which came a few centuries later, it's also called by the Latin word for Lamentations.

But in the Hebrew Bible, it had a different name. The name of the book in Hebrew Bible was How. H-O-W.

How. You'll notice that's also the first word in the book. This is often the way that the Hebrew Bible, not always, but often the way the Hebrew Bible named its books.

Genesis' name in the Hebrew Bible is In the Beginning. The name of the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible is Now These Are the Names, and so forth. So the first words in the book, in the Hebrew Bible, usually form the name of the book.

Likewise here, How. And, of course, the expression at the beginning is How lonely sits the city that was full of people, meaning Jerusalem. And it's lamenting over the fall of Jerusalem.

Now the word Lamentations literally means to cry aloud. And to lament means to grieve in loud cries. And Jeremiah, we already have observed, was called the weeping prophet.

Well, he was still weeping, even maybe more so after Jerusalem fell than before. It's interesting that Jeremiah, when he had been predicting that the temple would fall, for about 40 years he had been predicting it, and the Jews had been persecuting him for saying this, mocking him, trying to kill him for saying this. And he was weeping over them.

He was weeping over their fate, and yet they're trying to kill him. That after this judgment came upon them, you might think he'd feel so vindicated, he'd say, there you

go, I told you so, you know, why didn't you believe me? But instead of taking a sort of I told you so attitude, he is weeping over what has become of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. He's still brokenhearted over it.

He is definitely writing about the fall of Jerusalem. There's places in Lamentations that mention that. For example, in chapter 2, verse 15, it says, All who pass by clap their hands at you.

They hiss and shake their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem, which is a poetic word for Jerusalem and its inhabitants. And they say, is this the city that is called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth? So it's clearly Jerusalem that is the city that is here being lamented. And I mentioned in our study of Jeremiah that Jesus also had lamented over Jerusalem.

When we're talking about that, I mentioned Luke chapter 19, verses 40 through 44, which actually gives a lament that Jesus made over Jerusalem before it fell. Of course, he didn't live after it fell, but before his mystery took place. Also, in Matthew 23, he laments over the destruction that was going to come upon Jerusalem.

And so in a sense, some of these laments of Jesus over Jerusalem are somewhat parallel to the book of Lamentations in the mouth of Jeremiah. There is another book, probably not the same one, mentioned in 2 Chronicles chapter 35, interestingly, it's called Laments, which is the same thing as Lamentations. And it's mentioned in 2 Chronicles 35, 25.

After Josiah the king died, and there was great lamentation over his death, it says in verse 25, 2 Chronicles 35, 25, Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah. And to this day, all the singing men and the singing women of Josiah speak of Josiah in their lamentations, and they made it a custom in Israel. And indeed, they are written in the Laments.

That is in a document called the Laments. Now, this would not be our book of Lamentations, because this is talking about laments that are customarily sung by the Jews over the death of Josiah, which was considerably earlier than the destruction of Jerusalem. And so the book of Laments already existed.

Jeremiah was at least one of the contributors to its contents. Maybe he wrote the whole book, we don't know. But then we have this other book, Lamentations, which is about the lament over the fall of Jerusalem.

The author is clearly an eyewitness of the destruction. Places like chapter 1, verses 13 through 15 make that clear. And, you know, the author is speaking from eyewitness testimony.

And to say that this eyewitness who wrote it, who is remaining anonymous in his writings, is Jeremiah, seems to be supported by the many parallels between the wording

of Lamentations in certain places and the wording of Jeremiah. I'd like to give you five examples, if I could. In Lamentations 1-2, we read, "...she weeps bitterly in the night, her tears are on her cheeks.

Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her. They have become her enemies." Her, of course, is a reference to Jerusalem itself.

In Jeremiah chapter 30, in verse 14, it says, "...all your lovers have forgotten you, they do not seek you. For I have wounded you with the wound of an enemy, with the chastisement of a cruel one, for the multitude of your iniquities, because your sins have increased." So there's reference here to them lamenting and all of their lovers have abandoned them. Now, the lovers that are referred to are the false gods.

In Jeremiah chapter 2 and chapter 3, God spoke of Jerusalem's idolatry as if it was a woman cheating on her husband. God had made a covenant with Israel to be his wife at Mount Sinai. When they became a nation and a covenant people, they became his bride and he their husband.

But their later history involved them being unloyal to their God, their husband, and worshipping other gods, which God compared to a wife sleeping with other men, not her husband. And so all her lovers are the false gods that she had worshipped. They've all forgotten you, they've all abandoned you.

In other words, you looked to these gods as if they were real gods to protect you, to do for you the things that I should have been doing for you, that you want to meet, that I would have had to do, I would have wanted to do for you. But you look to these other gods and they're not helping you now. Where are they now? They've abandoned you.

And this language of the abandonment of Jerusalem by her lovers is the language both in Jeremiah and Lamentations. Also in Lamentations 115, I might have been thinking of Lamentations 116. For these things I weep, my eye overflows with water, because the Comforter who should restore my life is far from me.

If you would compare that with the words of Jeremiah in chapter 8 of Jeremiah, in verse 21, it says, For the hurt of the daughter of my people I am hurt, I am mourning. Astonishment has taken hold of me. This weeping motif, which is in chapter 1 in verse 16, is also found in chapter 2, verse 11, which says, My eyes fail with tears, my heart is troubled, my bile is poured on the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because the children and the infants faint in the streets of the city.

So again, this weeping, again in chapter 3 of Lamentations, verse 48, chapter 3, verse 48, says, My eyes overflow with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. This is very clearly an echo of Jeremiah's words in Jeremiah 9.1. Jeremiah 9.1,

Oh, that my head were waters, my eyes fount of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. Also in Jeremiah chapter 9, verse 18, Jeremiah said, Let them make haste and take up a wailing for us, that our eyes may run with tears and our eyelids gush out with water.

We can see why Jeremiah is often referred to as the weeping prophet. All these references to eyes gushing water and rivers of water flowing of tears and so forth. In Lamentations 222, Lamentations 222, it says, You have invited us to a feast day the terrors that surround me.

In the day of the Lord's anger, there was no refugee or survivor. Those whom I have born and brought up, my enemies have destroyed. This compares with Jeremiah chapter 6. With verse 24 through 26, I would say, We have heard the report of it.

Our hands grow feeble. Anguish has taken hold of us. Pain as a woman in labor do not go out into the field nor walk by the way because of the sword of the enemy.

The fear is on every side. Oh, daughter of my people, clothe yourself with sackcloth and roll about in ashes. Make mourning as for an only son, most bitter lamentation and plunder.

This is not, of course, exact wording, but this is the same kind of theme with similar imagery. And in Lamentations chapter four, verse 21, says, Rejoice and be glad, oh, daughter of Edom. You who dwell in the land of us, the cup shall also pass over to you and you should become drunk and make yourself naked.

That is to say that the Edomites are going to suffer the judgment also. By the way, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C., the Edomites, who had not yet been attacked by Babylon, were delighted because they've been long term rivals of the Jews. And they were glad to see the Jews go into captivity.

And they actually, according to Obadiah and some other prophets, they actually took advantage of the misfortune of the Jews and came and plundered the Judah alongside the Babylonians. However, three years later, the Babylonians conquered the Edomites, too, and took them into captivity. So the Edomites had a brief time of rejoicing over the fall of their enemy, but then they themselves were crushed by the same foot that had crushed Judah.

And that's what is referred to there. You'll also see this in Jeremiah. That was in Lamentations.

We were looking at this in Jeremiah chapter 49. In verse 12, for thus says the Lord, Behold, those whose judgment was not to drink of the cup have assuredly drunk. And are you the one who will altogether go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished, but you shall surely drink of it.

The idea being here that and this is, by the way, addressed to Edom also in chapter 49 of Jeremiah from verse seven on is addressed to Edom. And it says, you know, my people have drunk of the cup of judgment. You think you won't drink of it? You'll also drink of it as well.

So the threat to Edom that, you know, they've been rejoicing prematurely over the fall of Judah. They themselves are going to have the same kind of miseries brought upon them. Just throughout Lamentations, really, the motifs of judgment, the the imagery of the daughter of my people, those kinds of images that are so common in Jeremiah are throughout Lamentations as well, as we pointed out.

Now, although the book is primarily negative and pessimistic and a series of lamentations over the horrors and disasters that have come, it is not without its bright spots. For example, in chapter three and verse 22 through 26. And Lamentations three, 22 through 26, it says, though the Lord's through the Lord's mercies, we are not consumed because his compassions do not fail.

They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul.

Therefore, I hope in him. Now, of course, you recognize some of that from the old hymn, Great is my faithfulness. Morning by morning, new mercies I see that comes from this verse.

But it's a very positive and optimistic statement falling in the midst of an extremely depressing and pessimistic book. It's almost all about how sad and how horrible everything is. And yet in the midst of it, Jeremiah has a revelation that God is faithful.

His mercies will be seen again. And that Jeremiah says, I can hope in him. This seems like a hopeless situation, but because he is my portion, I can put my hope in him.

In the same chapter, verses 31 through 33, says, for the Lord will not cast off forever, though he causes grief. Yet he will show compassion according to the multitude of his mercies, for he does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. So this is an interesting statement.

It's not only one of the many places in the Bible that talk about God restoring his people from captivity, because Isaiah had written about that and Jeremiah and several of the other prophets did, that God would restore them from Babylon. But he makes this interesting statement about God's character. He says that God does, verse 33, does not afflict willingly.

And literally in the Hebrew, that means from his heart. When he afflicts people, that's not what's really in his heart. It's not from his heart that he afflicts.

He has to. He has to bring justice from time to time or else the moral universe will be out of whack. He has to correct things.

But it's not from his heart that he afflicts people. He's not the kind of God who wants to hurt people. But it says, nor does he willingly grieve the children of men.

So it's not, God doesn't enjoy grieving people. He doesn't enjoy afflicting people. And this is a picture of God that some people think the Old Testament doesn't contain.

It's very common for people to think, well, God in the New Testament exemplified it. Jesus is pretty loving, pretty merciful, very gracious. But God in the Old Testament is very grumpy, has a short fuse, very peevish.

You know, he just seems to be ready to look for any opportunity to strike and hurt people if they'll just step out of line just a little bit and fire from his presence to come and consume them, as happened in Nadab and Abihu, for example. But this picture of God as an angry God who's just looking for reasons to hurt people. And, you know, you better, you know, toe the line or else he's going to take every opportunity you give him to make your life miserable and afflict you.

This is not the character of God. It's certainly not the character of God as Jesus described him. And it's not the character of God as the Old Testament describes him.

Even in this, perhaps the most negative book in the Old Testament, and the one that focuses the most on the wrath of God, coming on his own people and doing horrible things to their society, you know, destroying it. In the midst of that, Jeremiah still sees the character of God as one who doesn't really want to do that kind of thing. He's not really inclined that way.

When he afflicts people, he doesn't do it because that's what's in his heart. He does it because that's what's necessary, because essentially justice demands it. But he doesn't want to grieve people.

He doesn't want to afflict people. That's not where he's at. And for Jeremiah to be able to know that and see that clearly in the midst of this kind of a situation that he was viewing, shows that he had revelation from God.

Because, I mean, let's face it, we have not faced trials like what Jeremiah is describing. We have trials, but nothing like this. You've never seen everyone you love slaughtered before your face.

You know, your society, your city burned down to the ground. Your friends carried away into captivity with hooks in their noses. The king having his son slaughtered before his eyes before his eyes are poked out.

I mean, these are the kinds of things that happened to the Jews. Jeremiah had lived to see that. So did his contemporaries who were survivors.

And yet he says, you know, but God is really good. God is really, really compassionate. He really doesn't like to do this kind of thing.

A lot of times when we have trials much more, you know, let's just say less severe than these trials that he was talking about, we may be tempted to wonder, is God really good? Is God punishing me? Is God angry? You know, God is not easily angered. We're told that in the Old Testament, as well as the New. In Psalm 103, it says that, you know, he won't always strive.

He won't keep his anger forever. It says, like a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. You know, he's slow to anger and plenteous in mercy.

That's the picture of God in the Old Testament. Some people get the wrong impression. And if you could ever get a different impression of God, it would be in the circumstances that Jeremiah was in.

And yet he still could see the goodness of God. It's like what the psalmist said in Psalm 27. I would have fainted had I not believed that I would someday see the goodness of God in the land of the living.

Not seeing it right now. And I would have fainted. I would have lost heart completely, except I trusted that God is good.

And I'm going to see that goodness of God again in the future. The book also ends a little more positively, at least with a prayer for restoration, suggesting that the prophet sees that as a hopeful possibility. In Chapter 5, verses 19 through 22, it says, You, O Lord, remain forever.

You're thrown from generation to generation. Why do you forget us forever and forsake us for so long a time? Turn us back to you, O Lord, and we will be restored. Renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us and are very angry with us.

But obviously, Jeremiah knows otherwise. He had predicted in his book, the book of Jeremiah, that God would restore them from the captivity. So he's praying for that restoration to take place.

Although in a rather gloomy mood. Now, the only other thing I want to say about this book that we'll consider it covered is the way it is structured. If you notice, and you probably would not notice unless someone pointed out to you, the first three chapters all have 22 verses.

Excuse me, the first two chapters have 22 verses, as does Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Of

the five chapters, four of them have 22 verses. The one in the middle, Chapter 3, has three times as many, 66 verses. Now, why would that be? Any clues? Anyone know what to look for in a situation like that? Many of the Psalms are that way, too.

Lots of the Psalms have 22 verses. Or multiples of 22. Some Psalms have 44, some have 66.

And Psalm 119 has 8 times 22. What's so significant about 22? That's the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. And these are what we call acrostics.

These are poems written in such a way in Hebrew that each verse follows the alphabet the next letter after the previous verse. So, if you're reading this in Hebrew, any of the Psalms have 22 verses. You're going to find that they go right through the Hebrew alphabet.

You won't see it in English, but if you're reading the Hebrew text, you would. There's 22 verses in the Hebrew alphabet. An acrostic poem usually takes a verse that starts with the first letter, then the next verse starts with the second letter, the third verse with the third letter, and so forth.

There's no spiritual significance in this that can be discerned. It's just an aesthetic. It's just a poetic thing.

It's what we call an acrostic. Now, in Psalms that have 44 verses, they have 2 verses for each letter of the alphabet. But they still have the 22 letters.

If a Psalm has 66 verses, it's going to have 3 of each. And like I said, Psalm 119 has 8 verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So it goes right through the Hebrew alphabet, and the first 8 verses are of the letter Aleph, the next 8 verses are of the letter Beth, and so forth, they all start with.

Now, here we have acrostics in chapter 1, 2, 3, and 4. Chapter 3, of course, has 66 verses, which means that there are 3 verses for the first letter of the alphabet, then 3 verses for the second, and so forth through the alphabet. Chapter 5, although it has 22 verses, is not an acrostic for some reason. Go figure.

I mean, it's clear that the book is largely written up as an acrostic, a set of acrostic poems. And the last chapter has the same number of verses, but it doesn't follow the alphabet. I do not know a reason for this.

I just say it because it's true. Apparently, the last poem was kept to the same length as the others, just for, I don't know, the beauty of symmetry or something like that, but the prophet did not bother to frame it according to the alphabetical order of the alphabet for some reason. But that's just a scholar's note or something.

It doesn't tell you anything about the spiritual significance of any of this. It's just one of those things that you'll see it, you'll see it especially in the Psalms. A very large number of Psalms have 22 verses or 44 or 66 or something along those lines.

And this set of poems also has the same number. But the first four chapters actually are an acrostic, each of them an acrostic poem. The last one looks like it from our point of view, because it has the same number of verses as an acrostic would, but for some reason in the Hebrew it doesn't follow the alphabet.

But reading the book is going to be very much like reading Jeremiah, to tell you the truth. And we're not going to read it now. I'm going to just leave you with those introductory thoughts.

I told you I'd keep it short, and this was short. So we now have covered Jeremiah and Lamentations. So the next time we get together in these meetings, we'll be going through Ezekiel.