

LAMENTATIONS

WRITER

There is no identity of the writer of this book. It has been traditionally believed that the writer was Jeremiah who was an eyewitness to the calamity that befell Jerusalem. He wrote these words as a lament over the fall of the city and the termination of national Israel as an independent nation. There are many similarities between this book and the book of Jeremiah. The Septuagint, as well as the ancient Syriac, Arabic and Vulgate translations, attribute the authorship of the book to Jeremiah. There is no conclusive evidence that he was not the author.

Those who question the authorship of Jeremiah point out that the acrostic literary style of the five poems, and the presence of new terms and phrases that are not common in the book of Jeremiah, suggest another writer. However, the many similarities between the two books seem to outweigh any justified denial of Jeremiah's authorship (See Jr 7:21 – Lm 1:15; Jr 9:1,18 – Lm 1:6). Jeremiah's emotional temperament and sensitive nature that are evident in both books are strong arguments for the traditional view that Jeremiah was indeed the writer.

The statement in 2 Chronicles 35:25 should not be used as evidence that Jeremiah wrote the book. The 2 Chronicles statement was a reference to writing a lamentation after the death of King Josiah. However, other than identifying Jeremiah with the writing of lamentation literature, the death of Josiah took place many years before the setting of the writing of the lamentations of this book over a fallen Jerusalem.

DATE

The lamentations that the writer pours out over Jerusalem indicate that he personally experienced the calamity of the fall of Jerusalem and the hardships of the residents of the land and the captives that immediately followed. Since the destruction of Jerusalem took place in 586 B.C., most Bible students date the book to have been written shortly after the arrival of the captives to Babylon.

BOOK

This is a book of five poems, with the fifth being in the form of a prayer. In the Hebrew text, the first four poems are alphabetic acrostics. It is difficult to determine why the writer used an acrostic style of writing, other than the fact that such a style of writing may have been for the purpose of aiding memorization of the book.

The first four poems are dirges over the devastation of the land, Jerusalem and

the people. They were possibly written as such to be recited by the people in expressing their sorrow over the fall of Jerusalem, which fall symbolized the termination of Israel as a free and independent nation. The meaning that is expressed in the poems is repentance, and a confession of Israel's sin of apostasy. In their confession, they understood that God was just in overthrowing Jerusalem. The dirges were written, therefore, for the purpose of helping the first generation of captives to confess their sins in order to change their culture of rebellion on behalf of their children and grandchildren. In order for a new generation of Jews to be born into the world and grow up obedient to God, their fathers had to confess to their apostasy from God. In doing so, they could train up their children to once again be the people of God.

Song Of A Mourning City

(1:1-22)

Outline: (1) Desolation of the city (1:1-7), (2) Sin of the city (1:8-11), (3) Pleas of the city (1:12-17), (4) Prayer of the city (1:18-22)

DESOLATION OF THE CITY

1:1-7 Jerusalem is here personified as a woman from whom her husband and children have been taken. She is a widow who mourns. In view of her origins, the question is how this could have happened. The greatness of her past history emphasized the extent of her mourning in loneliness. **Her lovers:** These were those with whom Jerusalem had made political alliances. She was betrayed by those who were supposed to help her. **No one to comfort her:** In the day of her calamity, none of the nations with whom she had made alliances were able to aid her. **Roads to Zion:** No one went to the feasts in Jerusalem, for the city was destroyed. The feasts had stopped, and the priests sighed for lack of those to whom they could minister in the sacrifices. The

people had become slaves to their Babylonian masters. The masters thus prospered because of the great number of Jews they had taken for slaves. **The Lord has afflicted her:** Her misery was the result of the judgment of God upon her sins. **Daughter of Zion:** Throughout the book this would be a personification of Jerusalem, the offspring of the people of Israel. **Princes:** There was no more strength in the leadership of Israel. While in the misery of captivity, the people remembered the good old days when they enjoyed pleasant things. They cried out, therefore, because they realized that they had lost all because of their transgressions.

SIN OF THE CITY

1:8-11 **Grievously sinned:** Her sin was grievous because it was the culture by which she lived. She became inwardly perverse. She thus became unclean as a menstruous woman. She had digressed to an evil heart of wickedness. **Seen her nakedness:** Her wicked character became known to all, and thus all turned

from her. The people lived for the present, and because they followed after the ways of a perverse culture, they did not remember where God said they would end up if they turned from Him. **Her pleasant things:** Her conquerors entered the temple and took all the bronze utensils and carried them away to Babylon. **Given their treasures:** The people gave over the city in order to survive the calamity of the city.

PLEAS OF THE CITY

1:12-17 The personification of a forsaken and desolate Jerusalem continues in these verses. **All you who pass by:** A desperate cry from Judah is made to all. The city begs for compassion. There is a confession in these words. She confesses that her calamity led to her Divine punishment. Nevertheless, she cried out from a heart of sorrow over her past transgressions. **Fire into my bones:** God's chastisement had subdued the inhabitants. **They are woven:** Her sins were woven into a yoke that was laid upon her neck. The young men either died in war, or had been taken into captivity. There was thus no relief from the grief that the people were suffering. The people were choked with tears and no one came to comfort them. **Menstruous woman:** The people are shunned as an unclean woman during her menstruous time.

PRAYER OF THE CITY

1:18-22 **I have rebelled:** The road to repentance and restitution begins with admission of one's own sin. **Hear:** Jerusalem wanted others to learn from her

example of rebellion. She wanted the world to understand that rebellion against the commandments of God would cause one to reap the consequences of God's judgment. **My lovers:** The nations in which the Israelites trusted for deliverance, forsook her. As Egypt, they too were punished for working against God's plan to discipline His people for their rebellion. **Priests ... elders:** When the calamity came, the character of the religious and civic leaders was manifested as they selfishly sought for their own survival. **My spirit is greatly troubled:** By the admission of guilt, the people resigned themselves to the punishment of God. In doing this, they understood that where they went in apostasy they must never go again. In their admission of guilt, they cried out for vindication. **Do to them:** God had formerly spoken through the prophets that He would bring calamity on those who afflicted His people. Though God worked through Assyria and Babylonia in order to discipline His people, the nations arrogantly carried out their work to destroy Israel completely. Their arrogance became the foundation upon which God's judgment upon them was just. The surrounding nations who rejoiced in the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, would suffer the same because of their rejoicing over the calamity of God's people.

Song Of A Broken People

(2:1-22)

Outline: (1) Destroyer of the people (1:1-10), (2) Anguish of the people (2:11-16), (3) Pleas of the people (2:17-22)

Chapter 2

This second poem expands the thoughts of the previous poem. It is a general lamentation of all the people of Israel, but particularly those of Judah and Jerusalem. The people recognized their apostasy, and thus accepted their national calamity as God's punishment for their apostasy.

DESTROYER OF THE PEOPLE

2:1-10 Jacob ... Judah: God is identified as the One who has worked against Jacob (Israel) and Judah in the time of their apostasy. He was the one who poured out judgment upon the people. **His anger:** Because they had rebelled against the will of God, they fell into the hands of God, and thus experienced His wrath (Hb 10:31). **Cloud:** They were overwhelmed with calamity. **The beauty of Israel:** The temple was torn down by the Babylonians. That religious symbol in which they had so much pride was taken away. **His footstool:** The mercy seat of the temple was destroyed. **Horn of Israel:** God brought the strength of Israel to a close. All the strength of the nation that was symbolized by structures and rulers in Jerusalem was brought to an end. National Israel as a glorious independent state was brought to a close. Nothing remained to identify her as a nation among the nations of the world. The destruction was total. **Taken away His tabernacle:** The glorious temple of stone and glamor was swept away as if it were a gardener's booth made of branches and leaves. **King and priest:** The civil head of state and the religious

leaders were terminated. The identity of the nation through these figures was taken away, and thus Israel could no longer be identified as an independent state.

ANGUISH OF THE PEOPLE

2:11-17 My ... tears: The devastation and termination of the Israelite state brought grief to the prophet (See Jr 9:1; 14:17). As an Israelite, Jeremiah was loyal to Israel for he understood that the Israelites were the people of God. Seeing and experiencing the termination of Israel as an independent state brought great sorrow in his heart. One must imagine the termination of his own country as if it had been in existence for almost one thousand years, and then came to an end in a matter of months. The extreme anguish that Jeremiah and the captives experienced would have certainly been unbearable. The nature of the message of Lamentations must be understood in view of the fact that a nation that existed for one thousand years had come to an end. **To what will I compare you:** No other nation that had existed as long as Israel was brought to such a climatic conclusion in such a short time. **Your prophets:** The false prophets to which the people listened had given them false hopes of an early restoration. **Not discovered your iniquity:** Instead of preaching against the sin of the people, the false prophets condoned their wicked behavior. By doing such, they actually sealed the fate of the nation. **Misleading oracles:** The false prophets preached what the people wanted to hear, and what

the people wanted to hear was confirmation of their idolatrous behavior. The false prophets, therefore, must take responsibility for the fall of the nation (See Jr 14:14-16; 23:9-40). Those preachers who will not take a stand for what the word of God says, are turning the people away from God. Though His people are not destroyed in time as Israel, apostates will be destroyed at the end of time (2 Th 2:6-9). **Opened their mouth against you:** Israel became arrogant in claiming to be a special nation that had been created by God. She announced this to all other nations, assuming that God had rejected other nations when He chose her. But now that she was taken out of existence, the other nations mocked the Israelites for their arrogance. They mocked the “national god” whom Israel claimed would never allow her to go out of existence as a nation. Her termination, therefore, became an occasion for other nations to mock the God of Israel, saying that He was no different than their own nationalistic gods. **He has fulfilled His word:** God was good for His word. When He gave Israel the law at Mount Sinai, He told Israel that if they forsook His commandments, He would forsake them, and then bring them to destruction (Lv 26:16; Dt 28). The point was that with great privilege, there comes great responsibility. Israel had the privilege of being a chosen people, and thus protected from the hostility of the nations by God’s protective care. They were thus known among the nations as a chosen people. However, when they forsook the One who created them as a nation, they

had to be terminated, for in the termination the nations had to see that God would not allow the apostasy of His chosen people to another god.

PLEAS OF THE PEOPLE

2:18,19 Jeremiah expressed a prayer for the people in these two verses. **Wall:** The walls of the cities metaphorically stood for the people. In this prayer, the people cried out to God for deliverance.

22:20-22 Jeremiah expressed the feelings of the people. They asked for God to reconsider them. They asked for a second chance. In doing so, the prophet rehearsed some of the terrible things that transpired during the destruction of Jerusalem. Their hope was in the fact that the God of mercy could not be indifferent concerning their plight.

The Weeping Prophet

(3:1-66)

Outline: (1) Lament from desperation (3:1-18), (2) Confession of faith (3:19-39), (3) Call for repentance (3:40-47), (4) Intercession (3:48-54), (5) Appeal for help (3:55-66)

Chapter 3

LAMENT FROM DESPERATION

The background of this poem rested on the events of Jeremiah’s life that are expressed in Jeremiah 20 & 38. Except for verses 40-47, this poem expresses the feelings of an individual. The individual, Jeremiah, expressed his emotions for the people. The problems of the people found their expression in the problems and inner turmoil of Jeremiah.

3:1-18 Each individual was an expression of the suffering of the nation. As the nation, Jeremiah bore the burden of the calamity, and thus the griefs of all the people. God had turned the brightness of life into a dim and hopeless future. They suffered from a national depression. And because the future was so dark, it was as if he were dead. In reality, the nation was dead. It was dead as an independent nation residing in a specific land. In God's chastisement of the nation, all joy was taken from the people. Because they had been fenced in by captivity, they had lost their freedom. The Babylonians sought to destroy their national identity by making them bow down to Babylonians gods. The Israelites cried out in captivity, but they would not regain their freedom until they had accomplished the seventy years of captivity. Their cries for freedom within the designated time of captivity, therefore, were not answered. In their predicament of captivity, God remained against them as a fierce bear or lion. As Jeremiah during his ministry was taunted by the people, now the nations taunted the captives. They were reaping what they had sown. **Wormwood:** This was a bitter substance as gall. **Forgot happiness:** As the years of captivity would progress, the people would forget what it was like when they lived in prosperity in the land of milk and honey. Only their children and grandchildren would have a chance to return to the land (See comments Er & Ne). All those who were taken into captivity would die in captivity.

CONFESSION OF FAITH

3:19-39 In the previous statements, the prophet poured out his heart in grief. And now he waited for a response from God. He thus prayed that God remember his affliction, the affliction of the entire people. The people had been humbled because of the apostasy and humiliated because of captivity and the loss of their national identity. But in his state of humiliation, Jeremiah remembered that God does not despise the broken. He remembered that God is compassionate, and thus he found hope in the fact that a compassionate God would not leave him and the nation in a state of destitution. **Great is Your faithfulness:** God is faithful to the broken because He is compassionate. **My portion:** God is the fullness of all our desires. And because He is such, only in Him is there hope. One discovers the faithfulness of God through obedience to His will. **Yoke of his youth:** When disciplined as a youth, one disciplines himself when an adult. Israel would thus remember the discipline of God in her youth, in order to restore the same for herself as an adult. Only in this would she be saved from the result of her apostasy. **He gives his cheek:** They would be blessed if they endured the humiliation of captivity. Their abasement would eventually lead to a restoration of their freedom. Therefore, they must endure hardship in order to be molded after the character of their Creator (Compare Is 50:6; Mt 5:36). **Not reject forever:** When the molding of the character of the people was complete,

then restoration would occur. They must, therefore, see the work of God in their suffering. God allows suffering to come in order to mold our characters for eternal dwelling. For this reason, we must not despise the chastisement of the Lord. ***He does not afflict willingly:*** God is not mean. He has eternity in view. His chastisement is for the purpose of restoring us to His ways, and thus mold us for eternal dwelling with Him. For this reason, we count it with all joy when we fall into different trials (Js 1:1,2). The grief into which He allowed His children to go, caused Him grief. When Israel left God, they placed themselves in the realm of Satan's work. It was Satan who ravaged the nation. God only allowed Satan to have his way with His people. God is not fiendish, therefore, by allowing us to live in an environment wherein Satan goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Pt 5:8).

CALL FOR REPENTANCE

3:40-47 In this section the writer placed himself with the people, and thus used the third person pronoun. ***Examine our ways:*** Before there can be repentance, admission of one's sin must take place. ***We have transgressed:*** After admission of sin, comes confession. Israel could not find her way back to God unless she realized that she had strayed from His commandments. One of the reasons why the nation was destroyed was because the people did not know that they had strayed from God. They could not repent because they did not realize that they had sinned. ***You have slain:***

God did what He promised. He brought destruction on the people because they broke their covenant relationship with Him. In their apostasy, they transgressed the conditions of the covenant. ***Cloud:*** Because they went into apostasy, and did not live according to His law, He would not hear their prayers. Prayer is answered only when one prays according to the will of God (Ps 66:18; see comments 1 Jn 5:14).

INTERCESSION

3:48-54 ***Destruction of the daughter:*** Jeremiah cried out to God because of his remorse over the moral apostasy of the people, and the destruction that resulted from God's chastisement of the people. ***Until the Lord looks down:*** He would plead without ceasing until the Lord took notice of the plight of His people (Compare Mt 15:21-28; 1 Th 5:17). He would pray until there was an answer. ***The dungeon:*** Jeremiah recalled his own experience in the cistern when he was rejected by the people (Jr 38:6-13). Now the entire nation was in the pit of captivity, and thus needed to pray for deliverance.

APPEAL FOR HELP

3:55-66 Jeremiah recalled the time when God answered his prayer for deliverance from the cistern into which the people had earlier cast him. And now, he prays that God will remember His people in the pit of captivity. ***Repay them:*** Those who cast Jeremiah in the cistern were gone. They had failed to heed his warning that unless they gave

themselves over to the Babylonians, they would die by the sword. They did not surrender, and subsequently, they died. At the time of writing, Jeremiah sees God's people as cast into the dungeon of captivity. He called on God to render to the captors the same judgment that He had rendered to those who had personally cast him into the dungeon before the fall of Jerusalem.

The Desolate Kingdom

(4:1-22)

Outline: (1) Consequences of sin (4:1-12), (2) Power of sin (4:13-16), (3) Vanity of the past (4:17-20), (4) Condemnation of Edom (4:21,22)

Chapter 4

CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

This chapter is a poem of contrasts between the former state of Jerusalem and what was left after the destruction of the city by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The description that is given here of the society prior to the destruction manifests the depths to which the people went in moral degradation.

4:1-12 *Dim:* The once brilliant city was changed to a place of devastation. The description of the change in the moral fiber of the society is here presented as a dirge. Jerusalem was once a glorious product of the people, but at the time of writing it was in ashes. The ashes of the temple were scattered throughout the streets of the city. A generation of youth lie dead in the streets. Like broken pitchers of the potter, they lie dead, and thus the people to whom this proph-

ecy was addressed no longer had a future in the land. During the 30 months of siege against the city by the Babylonians, conditions became so bad in the city that mothers ate their children. They became like violent monsters who turned against their own children. Ostriches were noted for their neglect of their offspring, and thus the mothers of the besieged city became the same in reference to their children (Jb 39:13-17). ***Embrace ash heaps:*** Conditions in the besieged city became so bad that the inhabitants dug through the city dumps looking for food. ***Sodom:*** The fate of the people was worse than Sodom, for Sodom was destroyed in a moment. The pitiful condition of the inhabitants of Jerusalem went on for months during siege of the city. ***Her princes:*** The rulers who once paraded themselves before the people in fine garments were now either dead or paraded off to Babylon in the rags of a captive. Though their bodies were once fat from the lavish living style they had enjoyed, now they were skin and bones.

POWER OF SIN

4:13-16 *Because of the sins of her prophets ... priests:* The destruction of national Israel as an independent state was the result of the religious leaders of the people. The same would happen again in history in A.D. 70 with another destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (See comments Mt 24). Because of their ignorance of the word of God, the erroneous falsehoods they preached, and their immoral behavior of their lives, the religious leadership brought the nation to a

close (See comments Hs 4:6). **Shed blood:** The religious leaders were guilty of murder in the sense that the faithful people within the besieged city had to pay the price of death because they were victims of the leadership of those who held the people in bondage. **People do not respect the priests ... elders:** Once the end finally came, the people realized that their leaders led them in the wrong direction. They had preached peace when there was no peace (Jr 6:14). They did not preach against the sins of the people lest they lose their support from the people. They followed the road of popularity among the people instead of turning the people from the error of their ways. Both they and the people believed a lie, but were condemned for believing it (2 Th 2:9-12; see Jr 5:31; 6:13; 23:11-16).

VANITY OF THE PAST

4:17-20 **Help was useless:** Judah thought that the Egyptians would come to their aid (See Jr 7). However, the Babylonians turned from the siege of Jerusalem for a short time in order to defeat the Egyptians, sending them back to Egypt. And then in 582/581 B.C., the Babylonians ravaged the land of Egypt. **Swifter than eagles:** There was no place to which the Jews could go to escape the Babylonians. Zedekiah fled from the city, but the Babylonians caught him (Jr 39:4-7). A remnant of defiant Jews fled to Egypt after they assassinated Gedaliah, but the Babylonians went into Egypt and killed most of them.

CONDEMNATION OF EDOM

4:21,22 The Edomites were always antagonistic of Israel, though they were descendants of Abraham through Esau. However, Edom's arrogance against Israel finally brought her to national extinction. When Jerusalem was under attack from the Babylonians, Edom sided with the enemies of the Jews. She even went as far as to grab some of the land possessions of the Israelites (See Ez 35:10-12). **Rejoice and be glad:** This is an irony. **The cup:** This was the cup of judgment (Jr 25:15-28). Edom should rejoice while she could, for calamity was coming her way. She would fall in a drunken stupor. **Punishment ... completed:** In comparison to the future of Edom and Judah, Judah had a future, but Edom did not. Edom would be terminated as an existing nation among the nations of the world (Ob 18).

Appeal Of A Penitent People (5:1-22)

Outline: (1) Appeal for mercy (5:1-6), (2) Disasters from sin (5:7-18), (3) Appeal to God (5:19-23)

Chapter 5

APPEAL FOR MERCY

This last poem is a prayer, though it is not written in the style of an alphabetic acrostic. In the prayer, the writer reflects on the past calamities of the people in order to move God to compassion. The confessions of the sins of the past are a plea for the mercy of God.

5:1-6 Remember: This word is used

as a plea to God. God does not forget. His children plead to Him to remember and to enact His promises to deliver them from their dire circumstances. In their captivity, the people were helpless as orphans and widows. They had to buy from their captors the basic things of life in order to exist. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the poorest of the land were left by the Babylonians. The picture here may be that these poor Israelites, who were left in the land, had to buy water and wood that was formerly theirs as a part of their ownership of the land. They were now strangers in their own land. They lived as forced slaves in their own land, as well as slaves in the land of their captors. **Submitted to Egypt:** They were humiliated to the point of having to buy from Egypt and Assyria in order not to starve.

DISASTERS FROM SIN

5:7-18 *Fathers have sinned ... borne their iniquities:* The fathers had gone into apostasy, and subsequently, the children had to bear the burden of captivity. The children reaped the consequences of their fathers' sins, not the guilt for their sin. For this reason, the children could be shown the mercy of God, though the fathers had to die in captivity as slaves. ***Sword of the wilderness:*** The raiders of the desert endangered their lives when

they wandered in scavenging for anything to eat. ***Skin is hot:*** They suffered from the fever of starvation. They were a remnant people left in a devastated land. They were the survivors of a national disaster that was the result of the sins of the fathers. They were morally despondent because there was no hope for the future. Jeremiah's plea, therefore, was that God show mercy.

APPEAL TO GOD

5:19-22 These words, though written by the prophet who knew that God had not forgotten them, voices the feelings of the people. In their despair, the people reach out to God for help. They had reached the lowest point of human survival, and thus were ready for a turn in international events that might bring favor upon them as a people. God was at the time of their agony working among the nations in order to raise up the Medo-Persian Empire against the Babylonians. When this eventually happened within a generation from the time of this writing, the Jews would once again enjoy the relief that would come when their brothers would return from their captivity in the east to aid in the reconstruction of the land. They would discover that they were not utterly rejected by God. They would discover that God was still watching over His people.