

# LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

Lamentations is an extension of the Book of Jeremiah: a collection of five poems that mourn the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.. According to tradition, Jeremiah wrote these laments for the city's inhabitants that he had spent much of his life trying to bring back to God.

In the Book of Exodus, before entering the Promised Land, Israel was given a choice: remain loyal to God and enjoy His blessings and prosperity, or worship other gods and suffer exile (Deuteronomy 28-30). Tragically Israel chose to follow other gods and ignore God's laws. Thus the people who had once sworn to love, obey, and follow the Lord had broken their promises; and God, Who is faithful and just, punished Israel. Jerusalem fell and the people mourned.

## **The destruction of Jerusalem, Daughter of Zion (Lam. 1)**

The first poem features Jerusalem personified as a woman who weeps bitterly in her disgrace and shame. Halfway through the poem Jerusalem speaks in the first person, lamenting what the Lord has done to her because of her sins. She speaks to those who pass by and gawk at her desolation: **“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger”** (Lam. 1:12).

## **It is Yahweh who brought Jerusalem to an end (Lam. 2)**

The second poem emphasizes Yahweh, “the Lord,” Who brought about the destruction of the “daughter of Zion,” (“Zion” = Jerusalem; “daughter” = the people of Israel). God's wrath and indignation at the sins of Jerusalem has made God “like an enemy” to His people. Yet we see also that Jerusalem's suffering should not keep the people from praying. Rather, the people should intensify their prayer and pour out their hearts “like water” before the Lord. This image of “pouring out” is taken directly from the animal blood sacrifices that were poured out “like water” on the altar of the now destroyed Temple sanctuary (Deuteronomy 12:16, 24).

## **The lament of the man who has seen affliction (Lam. 3)**

At the center of Lamentations is an individual's confession, traditionally identified with Jeremiah himself. The author complains of mistreatment by both God and men and cries out for deliverance. Despite the author's emotions, describing how he is afflicted, abandoned, and even persecuted by God, the author yet does not abandon hope: **“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’”** (Lam. 3:19-24).

It should be noted that Lamentations in general is not a work of cynicism but a plea for deliverance and an assertion of hope that, despite all appearances to the contrary, **“the Lord is good to those who wait for him”** (Lam. 3:25).

**The fall of Jerusalem** (Lam. 4)

The poem describes the terrible fall of Jerusalem and all that she suffered, including a merciful “beatitude” for those who were killed by the sword.

**The prayer of the Jerusalemites** (Lam. 5)

Again, Jerusalem is speaking in the first-person singular. Mount Zion (Jerusalem) lies desolate as she describes all the sufferings and persecutions of the siege survivors and prays to God for restoration.

Along with the Book of Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Esther, Lamentations is one of the “Five Scrolls” enshrined in synagogues today and read on particular holy days. Lamentations is traditionally read on a variable day between July and August to mark the day when both the First and Second Temples were destroyed.

Finally, in the Christian tradition, Lamentations is read during Holy Week, especially during the Stations of the Cross and on Good Friday—the commemoration of the destruction of the body of Christ, which is the New Temple (John 2:21).