

## Reading Lamentations

### The Big Picture

- 1 Acrostic Poem about the exile
- 2 Acrostic Poem about the exile
- 3 Acrostic Poem about *the sufferer*
- 4 Acrostic Poem about the exile
- 5 Non-Acrostic Poem about the exile

\*\*“Acrostic” is an alphabet poem, where every line/verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet. Lamentations 1-4 are all alphabet poems spelling out Israel’s suffering from A to Z.

### Historical Background

The poet is reflecting on the attacks of Babylon on Jerusalem in the years between 600-580 BC. In 586 BC Jerusalem was burned to the ground, the temple destroyed, and thousands of Israelites were carried away captive to Babylon. For a narrative of the events, see 2 Kings 24-25.

### Themes in Lamentations

1. The exile was the result of Israel’s sin and covenant violation: 1:5, 18; 2:14; 4:6, 13; 5:7, 16
2. Jerusalem is depicted as a woman or “daughter” who has lost her children: 1:6, 15; 2:1, 11
3. The fact that there is an explanation for Israel’s suffering does not take away the grief and confusion: 2:1-13
4. The mysterious “suffering one” of ch. 3 bears a striking resemblance to the servant of Isaiah 53 and the sufferer in the Psalms: Israel’s suffering will be borne and carried by an individual
5. Despite all the suffering, there is hope on the other side of exile: 3:22-33, 3:40-42
6. Lamentations explores the back-and-forth of faith and despair and God’s people wait on his promises. The poems are entirely human speech to God, which become God’s word to his people in Scripture: God is here showing that grief, lament, anger and yelling at him are all appropriate ways of dealing with hardship and suffering.
7. Lament is a crucial part of dealing with grief by fully facing it and naming the pain. It allows for a future resolution and creates a place where one can move forward without feeling like the pain has been glossed over.

Lamentation names what is wrong, what is out of order in God’s world, what keeps human beings from thriving in all their creative potential. Simple acts of lament expose these conditions, name them, open them to grief and anger, and make them visible for remedy. In its complaint, anger and grief, lamentation protests conditions that prevent human thriving and this resistance may finally prepare the way for healing. Kathleen O’Connor, “Lamentations” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* (Vol. 6, pp. 1011-76).

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