

Old Testament Survey

Lamentations

The Meaning of Lamentations

Lamentations is a book of woe spoken over Judah because of its idolatry. God's judgment will inevitably fall on Judah, disaster cannot be averted, however even though God's judgment will fall, Israel should repent and turn to God for mercy.

Interestingly, Lamentations 1-4 is written in acrostic form. Lamentations 1, 2, and 4 have 22 verses, each starting with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Lamentations 3 has 66 verses, three each starting with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

General Outline of Lamentations

- I. Jerusalem devastated and forsaken - Lamentations 1:1-22
- II. Reasons for God's wrath; repentance and its only hope - Lamentations 2:1-22
- III. The city's lament for its devastation; its repentance at remembrance of God's former mercies - Lamentations 3:1-66
- IV. Zion's ancient glory contrasted with her present misery - Lamentations 4:1-22
- V. Repentant nations casts itself on God's mercy - Lamentations 5:1-22

Authorship and Composition

1. Lamentations does not mention its author, nevertheless there is a continuous and uniform tradition assigning it to Jeremiah.
2. Early church fathers assigned the authorship to Jeremiah.
3. Critics again refuse to assign authorship to Jeremiah due to supposed internal stylistic differences that would point to an alternative author.
4. One thing is certain, whoever wrote the book of Lamentations was an eyewitness of the slaughter and judgment meted out on the city when conquered by the Babylonians.
5. In answer to the supposed stylistic differences, there are many similarities between Lamentations and Jeremiah:
 - a. The oppressed virgin daughter of Zion - Lamentations 1:15, Jeremiah 8:21.
 - b. Eyes flowing with tears - Lamentations 1:16, Jeremiah 9:1.
 - c. "Among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her" - Lamentations 1:12, Jeremiah 30:14.
 - d. The winecup of God's judgment - Lamentations 4:21, Jeremiah 49:12.
6. In answer to the differences in viewpoint:
 - a. Jeremiah sees the Babylonians as executors of God's judgment whereas Lamentations sees them as wicked pagans.

These two ideas are not mutually exclusive. God used the wicked Chaldeans to execute his judgment on Israel.

- b. Jeremiah does not see any help as coming from Egypt whereas Lamentations 4:17 appears to do so.

However, Lamentations is expressing the sentiment of the nation, not of the prophet.

7. Critics use the tone of Lamentations 3:1-18 compared to Lamentations 3:19-39 to prove multiple sources. In the first part of the chapter God is seen to be severe in his judgment, and in the last part God is praised for mercy.

This cannot be substantiated due to the acrostic nature of Lamentations 3. To assert multiple sources exist is to deny the literary nature and style of Lamentations.