

BY ALLAN MOSELEY

THE HEBREW TITLE of the Book of Lamentations is *'eka*, which means "how?" This is the first word of the Hebrew text, in keeping with the Hebrew custom of naming books according to the first word. The later rabbis (during the intertestamental period) called the book by the Hebrew word *qinot*, which means "lamentations." The Septuagint, (a Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew text, translated about 250–100 B.C.), followed the rabbis and entitled the book *Threni*. The Latin Vulgate followed the Septuagint and named the book *Lamenta*. Both the Greek and Latin words mean "Lamentations."

The Hebrew text of Lamentations does not name the author. In the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations is in the

section of the canon called the Writings and not after the Book of Jeremiah. Jewish tradition, however, assigns the book to Jeremiah. The translators of the Septuagint placed the Book of Lamentations after the Book of Jeremiah and included the following words in the first verse of the book: "Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem." Neither this statement nor Jeremiah's name is found in the Hebrew text.

A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. during the month of Ab, the fifth month on the Jewish calendar. The Jews set aside the seventh day of Ab every year to mourn the destruction of the Holy City. They observed this date until the second century A.D., when they moved the recognition to the ninth of Ab.¹ Through the

Lamenta

Its Time and Writing

centuries, every year on the ninth of Ab, the Jews read the Book of Lamentations, which was written to lament the decimation of Jerusalem.

The Bible states that the Babylonians defeated Jerusalem because the Lord was judging the sins of His people (2 Kings 24:1-5,18-20; Jer. 7:13-15,34). In fact, the Lord had promised His people through Moses that if they obeyed Him they would prosper, but if they disobeyed Him “the Lord will bring a nation against you from afar. . . . It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land” (Deut. 28:49,52).²

The Lord used the Babylonians to accomplish His judgment. In the latter part of the sixth century B.C., Judah was a vassal state of Egypt. Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim king of Judah, changed his name to Jehoiakim,

and collected tribute from him. However, when Babylon defeated the Egyptian army at Carchemish in 605 B.C., Judah became a vassal state of Babylon. After three years Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, responded by marching on Jerusalem and taking Jehoiakim’s son Jehoiachin into exile (Jehoiakim died before Nebuchadnezzar arrived). Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah king in Jehoiachin’s place.

Zedekiah was loyal to Babylon for 10 years, but when he rebelled, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem. This

LESSON REFERENCE

FBSC: The Book of Lamentations

tions



Plains around Carchemish. In 605, Nebuchadnezzar defeated Neco II at Carchemish.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (25/6/20)

Left: Black granite brick-shaped block from a

foundation deposit of a temple of King Neco II of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (610-595 B.C.). The king’s names and titles are inscribed on four sides of the block.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (637/4)

time he was not satisfied to conquer Judah and Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar's armies completely destroyed the principle cities of Judah, including Jerusalem. Unlike modern warfare, such destruction did not occur in a matter of a few days. It took months to besiege and burn cities. And during those months the residents of nearby cities wondered whether they would be next on the Babylonians' assault list. One can get a glimpse of the anxiety of this situation through some letters archaeologists found in Lachish (west by southwest of Jerusalem). Someone in Jerusalem wrote these letters to Lachish during the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 586 B.C. One letter says, "We are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah."³ These cities were relaying smoke signals to one another about their status and the status of the Babylonian army. Azekah, which was located between Jerusalem and Lachish, had not been sending any signals. Knowing that Azekah had fallen, the people of Jerusalem, therefore, wrote to Lachish to ask about the progress of the Babylonian onslaught. Jerusalem was watching from a distance as neighboring cities fell to the enemy and was wanting some word of hope.

The Babylonians, however, continued toward Jerusalem, besieged it, burned it, and leveled it. They made Zedekiah watch as they killed his sons, then they put out Zedekiah's eyes and took him to Babylon. Nebuzaradan, captain of the Babylonian army, then burned Jerusalem to the ground, including the temple and "all the houses of Jerusalem" (2 Kings 25:9). Nothing was left of "the city of our God" (Ps. 48:1).

The extent of the physical destruction helps us understand why the Jews mourned Jerusalem's demise. This was the city of God (v. 1) and home to Mount Zion, "the joy of the whole earth" (v. 2). The Jews understood that the death of Jerusalem meant the death of the Davidic monarchy, and the Lord had promised David, "Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16). On the basis of these promises, the Jews thought Jerusalem would always survive. When Jerusalem fell, though, they must have concluded that the promises of God had failed. They did not know that the Lord planned to keep His promises by reestablishing the Davidic dynasty forever through Jesus, the Messiah and the descendant of David.

AN EXPRESSION OF GRIEF

The Book of Lamentations poignantly expresses the Jews' grief over the fall of their beloved city. Each of the five chapters of the book consists of a separate poem. Four of the chapters are acrostic poems, meaning the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet occur in succession at the beginning of each stanza. This poetic style of lament had precedent in the ancient Near East. Around 2000-1800 B.C. the Sumerians wrote such laments after the fall of major cities like Ur, Eridu, Uruk, and Nippur.⁴ The possibility that the author(s) of the Book of

Lamentations had seen the Sumerian literature is highly unlikely since both geography and chronology (about 1,200-1,400 years) separated the writers from the literature. Nevertheless, the Jews may have been familiar with the idea of writing lament literature as an expression of mourning over a conquered city.

Most scholars conclude that an eyewitness of Jerusalem's destruction wrote the Book of Lamentations. This explains the vivid detail of the book—"Her gates have sunk into the ground" (2:9), "How dark the gold has become" (4:1), and "Her consecrated ones were purer than snow . . . their skin is shriveled on their bones" (4:7,8).

If the poems in the book were written by an eyewitness (like Jeremiah), they were written soon after the dreadful events that the book describes. The author and his contemporaries had seen the Babylonians commit gruesome acts of violence. Siege warfare resulted in life-threatening hunger and thirst, and the Book of Lamentations provides ghastly descriptions of such realities.

"Little ones and infants faint
In the streets of the city.
They say to their mothers,
'Where is grain and wine?'
As they faint like a wounded man
In the streets of the city,
As their life is poured out
On their mothers' bosom"
(2:11b-12). "The hands of
compassionate women
Boiled their own children;
They became food for them"
(4:10a).

The Babylonians carried many Judeans into exile. Exiles were often transported over long distances bound in fetters (2 Kings 25:7), and sometimes even impaled with hooks (Amos 4:2).

We can understand why the Jews cried out to God in grief after seeing such barbaric atrocities. Jeremiah, who lived through the Babylonians' attack, had promised God's people that the Babylonian exile would last only 70 years and that Judah would be restored (Jer. 25:11-12; 30-31), but there is no such glimmer of hope in the Book of Lamentations. The author expressed only horror over the death of loved ones and their city. He clearly understood these events as the judgment of God against the sin of Judah (for example, 1:5, 12, 14, 15; 2:1). The book, then, provides a permanent portrait of the pain sin produces. **B**

1 H. L. Ellison, "Lamentations" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 696-697.

2. All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

3. See "Lachish Ostrcon IV" in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, James B. Pritchard, ed. 3d ed. with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 322.

4. Piotr Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 4-5.

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