

# The Lamentations of Jeremiah

## Lesson 1

### Lamentations 1:1-22

#### Introduction

Before 320 BC, the compilers of the Hebrew Bible placed the Lamentations of Jeremiah among the major prophet books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. It consists of five songs and rightfully belongs with the Psalms, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs rather than the prophets. However, had it not been a song, it could have been considered a historical book because each stanza of each lament is filled with the history of Israel's sin and demise. Additionally, many commentaries say that this book is the lamentation or eulogy composed by Jeremiah after the death of King Josiah. This opinion is based mainly on 2 Chronicles 35:25.

**2 Chronicles 35:**<sup>25</sup> Then Jeremiah chanted a lament for Josiah. And all the male and female singers speak about Josiah in their lamentations to this day. And they made them an ordinance in Israel; behold, they are also written in the Lamentations.

Contextually, it seems that Lamentations Chapter 5 could be the record of the lament of Jeremiah after the death of Josiah although the king is not mentioned in the chapter or anywhere else in the entire book. Additionally, the first four chapters clearly lament other events in the history of the Southern Kingdom.

Josiah ruled as king of the Southern Kingdom for 32 years, from 640 BC – 608 BC. Although four kings would follow him, Josiah was the last true king to rule the Southern Kingdom without oversight from an outside influence. All of the following kings were under the thumb of Necho, the Pharaoh of Egypt or Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon.

#### THE LAST FIVE KINGS OF THE SOUTHERN KINGDOM

King	Years in Power	Year Began	Year End	Scripture Reference	Influence
<b>Josiah</b>	31	640	608	2 Kings 22:1-2	
<b>Jehoahaz</b>	3 months	608	608	2 Kings 23:31	Necho/Nebuchadnezzar
<b>Jehoakim</b>	11	608	597	2 Kings 23:34-37	Nebuchadnezzar
<b>Jehoachin</b>	3 months	597	597	2 Kings 24:5	Nebuchadnezzar
<b>Zedekiah</b>	11	597	586	2 Kings 24:17	Nebuchadnezzar

According to the opening of Jeremiah's prophecy, his ministry began in the 13<sup>th</sup> year of Josiah's reign and lasted until five months after Zedekiah was removed from the throne and taken to Babylon.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Jeremiah's ministry can be dated from 627 BC to 586 BC, lasting approximately 41 years.

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<sup>1</sup> **Jeremiah 1:1-3** <sup>1</sup> The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, <sup>2</sup> to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the

## Summary of the History of the Last Five Kings

Josiah became king at the age of eight when his father, Amon, was murdered. He was a good king who ruled 31 years.<sup>2</sup> In Josiah's eighteenth year as king, the temple needed repairs. He sent Hilkiah to count the money in the treasury and hire the workers. During the cleanup of the temple the Book of the Law was found. Hilkiah read it and gave it to Shaphan who then read it to Josiah. The king realized that they were a sinful nation and that the Lord's wrath was about to come on them. Josiah reestablished the Passover exactly as set out in the Book of the Law. Even with that effort, the Lord would still remove the Southern Kingdom and place it in exile. He was still upset with the people for following the evil ways of Josiah's grandfather, King Manasseh.<sup>3</sup>

In Josiah's thirty-first year as king, Pharaoh Neco visited the king of Assyria at the Euphrates River and when he saw Josiah at Megiddo, he killed him. Josiah's body was taken back to Jerusalem and buried there.<sup>4</sup>

With his father's death, Jehoahaz was made king over the Southern Kingdom. An evil king, he reigned three months before Pharaoh Neco put him in prison at Riblah. Later Neco took him to Egypt where he died.<sup>5</sup>

Pharaoh Neco placed a tax on the Southern Kingdom of 100 talents of silver and one talent of gold. He also made Eliakim, Josiah's other son, king and changed his name to Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was also evil and ruled under Pharaoh Neco's thumb for most of eleven years.<sup>6</sup>

During the last three years of Jehoiakim's life, he became subservient to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, but then rebelled and the Babylonian king sent Chaldeans, Moabites, Aramites and Ammonites to overthrow him. All of these events occurred because the Lord would not forgive the sins of Manasseh.<sup>7</sup>

With the death of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin took his father's throne and ruled three months during Nebuchadnezzar's eighth year as king. Pharaoh Neco did not threaten the Southern Kingdom again because Nebuchadnezzar conquered him during the same siege. During Jehoiachin's reign, Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Southern Kingdom and took all the treasury of the temple to the treasury of Babylon. He led all the exiled people to his country including Jehoiachin and his family.<sup>8</sup>

Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle king, changing his name from Mattaniah to Zedekiah. He was an evil ruler who reigned for eleven years. In his ninth year, Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian king came with all his

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thirteenth year of his reign.<sup>3</sup> It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 21:25-22:2; 2 Chronicles 34:1-2

<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 22:3-23:27; 2 Chronicles 34:8-13; 34:14-28; 34:29-33; 35:1-19

<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 23:28-30; 2 Chronicles 35:20-36:1

<sup>5</sup> 2 Kings 23:31-32; 2 Chronicles 36:2-4

<sup>6</sup> 2 Kings 23:33-37; 2 Chronicles 36:5-8; Jeremiah 35-36

<sup>7</sup> 2 Kings 24:6-16; 2 Chronicles 36:6-10

<sup>8</sup> 2 Kings 24:6-16; 2 Chronicles 36:6-10

forces to take Jerusalem, but Zedekiah was able to defend the city against Nebuchadnezzar's men for three years. On the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year, Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem. Zedekiah ran from the city but was captured with his family who were then taken to Riblah where Nebuchadnezzar was camped. Zedekiah witnessed his son's slaughter and then his eyes were put out.<sup>9</sup>

One month later on Sunday, August 4, 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar went to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, the palace and all the houses. Those who did not escape were taken into exile to Babylon along with everything of value. Seraiah, the high priest, and Zephaniah, the second priest, with the three temple officers, the king's advisors and 60 men of the town were killed at Riblah from which they had tried to escape.<sup>10</sup>

### **Time of the Writing**

Jeremiah was a witness to all the history of the last five kings and the songs of lamentation that he composed reflected the tragic events of those last years. It cannot be determined whether they were written over the course of his 41 year ministry or in his last five months, but all the old copies of the Septuagint, Vulgate and English Bibles include the following prologue before the beginning of Chapter 1 verse 1:

"And it came to pass after Israel had been carried away captive, and Jerusalem was become desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping: and he lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem; and he said."

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew text was started around 250 BC and completed about 123 BC. Whether or not the prologue was a part of the original Hebrew text is not known; however, it is this prologue that leads students of the Bible to believe that Lamentations was written during Jeremiah's last five months.

### **Structure of the Writing**

Jeremiah used an interesting structure in developing each of the five lamentations. Because each song was to be memorized and chanted, the Hebrew alphabet was used as the chronological acrostic structure of each lament. The first verse of each song begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second verse with the second letter, the third verse with the third and so on. In the third lament, Jeremiah repeats the alphabet three times. When chanting the song in Hebrew, the singer could remember the next line based on the next letter of the alphabet. Sadly, the English translators were unable to carry that unique tool into their translation.

### **The Name, Lamentations**

The Greek Septuagint adopted the name Lamentations from the outset, but in the Hebrew, its name was taken from the first word, "How." Jeremiah's formula is a song of wailing; it asks God "how" has all this misery taken place. The Jews have never forgotten the purpose of each word. Today, each Friday afternoon Jews assemble to pray and wail about the troubles of Jerusalem, bowing at the wall, kissing the stones, wiping their tears upon the stones and reading the Lamentations

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 24:17-25:7; 2 Chronicles 36:11-14; Jeremiah 52:1-3; 32-34, 37-38

<sup>10</sup> 2 Kings 25:8-21; 2 Chronicles 36:15-23; Jeremiah 52:4-34; 39-44

and portions of the Psalms. The first lamentation began with the thought, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people!" The great Holy City's place of importance as well as the era of the Kings of Israel was over; all Jeremiah could see was the lonely city. At that time, he could not imagine that it would ever regain its prominence and respect in the world.

### **The Layout of this Lesson**

Each Lamentation is a song or poem. As such, it would normally be printed in the following form.

#### **Lamentations 1:1-2**

<sup>1</sup> How lonely sits the city  
That was full of people!  
She has become like a widow  
Who was *once* great among the nations!  
She who was a princess among the provinces  
Has become a forced laborer!

To shorten the length of each lesson, each lamentation will be printed in paragraph style, as follows and a "/" will be used to designate each new line in the stanza.

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>1</sup> How lonely sits the city / That was full of people! / She has become like a widow / Who was *once* great among the nations! / She who was a princess among the provinces / Has become a forced laborer!

#### **Lonely City**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>1</sup> How lonely sits the city / That was full of people! / She has become like a widow / Who was *once* great among the nations! / She who was a princess among the provinces / Has become a forced laborer!

How did the city of Jerusalem, a once bustling city, wind up in such a sad state? The Babylonians had robbed her of her promising youth and only the elderly and poor were the left behind. She was a widow. She no longer had a king. She no longer controlled her political business but labored as the hired help of the Babylonian government for 70 years.

#### **Treacherous Lovers**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>2</sup> She weeps bitterly in the night / And her tears are on her cheeks; / She has none to comfort her / Among all her lovers. / All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; / They have become her enemies.

Those surrounding nations who sought her friendship during the time of her prosperity, specifically during the time of David and Solomon, had forgotten their relationship and turned against her when she needed allies to help fend off Egypt and Babylon.

#### **Judah in Exile**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>3</sup> Judah has gone into exile under affliction / And under harsh servitude; / She dwells among the nations, / *But* she has found no rest; / All her pursuers have overtaken her / In the midst of distress.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah, consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were in exile either in Babylon or in the small tribal nations near Babylon that were under

its control. The strength of the youth was gone and there was no army, The Southern Kingdom was being taken over by neighboring nations, alien squatters on the once holy ground. Jeremiah could only watch as these events unfolded.

### **No Visitors for Feasts**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>4</sup> The roads of Zion are in mourning / Because no one comes to the appointed feasts. / All her gates are desolate; / Her priests are groaning, / Her virgins are afflicted, / And she herself is bitter.

Jews no longer came to celebrate the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem. The next festivals after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple on Sunday, August 4<sup>th</sup> 586 BC, were the Rosh Hashanah in September and Yom Kippur in October, but Jeremiah saw no one entering the city to celebrate the high holy days. There was no place to celebrate or worship. The few priests and people who were in the city groaned in dismay.

### **Jerusalem's Adversaries**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>5</sup> Her adversaries have become her masters, / Her enemies prosper; / For the LORD has caused her grief / Because of the multitude of her transgressions; / Her little ones have gone away / As captives before the adversary.

Jerusalem was in sad shape because of her great sins. For the most part, all of the kings of the Southern Kingdom through Josiah were good except one, Manasseh. His sinful leadership led to the Lord's punishment and exile of the kingdom because his legacy was neither overthrown nor corrected.<sup>11</sup> The people were so entrenched in the policies of Manasseh's reign that the Lord could stop their sin only by bringing an end to their kingdom. Jerusalem could have withstood Egypt and Babylon with the Lord's help, but in 606 BC, the Lord sent Babylon against His own people. The Lord was their enemy. Babylon was just a tool used by the Lord.

### **No More Royalty**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>6</sup> All her majesty / Has departed from the daughter of Zion; / Her princes have become like deer / That have found no pasture; / And they have fled without strength / Before the pursuer.

With Zedekiah's expulsion from the throne in 586 BC, no one from the royal line of David remained in Jerusalem to become king. The dynasty was over. Those who could have taken the throne were wandering among the nations of the world, far from the throne, without an army and without political strength.

### **Remember the Precious Things**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>7</sup> In the days of her affliction and homelessness / Jerusalem remembers all her precious things / That were from the days of old, / When her people fell into the hand of the adversary / And no one helped her. / The adversaries saw her, / They mocked at her ruin.

Jerusalem had been one of the wealthiest cities of the world, but after its destruction in 586 BC, the few inhabitants left in the city had lost everything of value, including the Temple. All they had were memories of the days of glory. The nations who hated

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Kings 22:3-23:27; 2 Chronicles 34:8-13; 34:14-28; 34:29-33; 35:1-19

Jerusalem were glad to see she was in such a dismal state. Finally, because she had no power over them, they taunted her with gesticulations.

### **Judah's Sin**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>8</sup> Jerusalem sinned greatly, / Therefore she has become an unclean thing. / All who honored her despise her / Because they have seen her nakedness; / Even she herself groans and turns away.

Even Jerusalem could only groan and turn away from the sight of her terrible state. Why had this devastation come upon her? It was because of her uncleanness. Those who once thought she had no sin despised her because they had seen the great magnitude of her sin.

### **Judah's Uncleanness**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>9</sup> Her uncleanness was in her skirts; / She did not consider her future. / Therefore she has fallen astonishingly; / She has no comforter. / "See, O LORD, my affliction, / For the enemy has magnified himself!"

For years, Jerusalem was skirted with a dress that appeared to be beautiful from a distance, but up close, in the pleats and folds of the senate's chambers, the king's war room and the priest's council palace, filth gathered. The skirt needed to be washed, but if it was taken off, it would reveal the truth about the owner's hygiene. Her skirt was so dirty that she could not get it clean. No one wanted to touch it. All the while, Babylon was gaining strength.

### **Nation Enter Jerusalem's Sanctuary**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>10</sup> The adversary has stretched out his hand / Over all her precious things, / For she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, / The ones whom You commanded / That they should not enter into Your congregation.

The Mosaic Law would not allow gentiles in the Temple. In 586 BC, the Jews saw the gentiles of Babylon enter the Temple and destroy it. The most precious earthly possessions to the Jews were the Temple and its content but they no longer belonged to them.

### **Pawned Goods**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>11</sup> All her people groan seeking bread; / They have given their precious things for food / To restore their lives themselves. / "See, O LORD, and look, / For I am despised."

During the surges of both Egypt and Babylon, the people of the Southern Kingdom struggled to feed their families. In desperation, they began selling off or trading their most precious household items for food. That plan did not last long; the people soon began to starve when everything they owned was gone.

### **Judah's Pain**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>12</sup> "Is it nothing to all you who pass this way? / Look and see if there is any pain like my pain / Which was severely dealt out to me, / Which the LORD inflicted / On the day of His fierce anger.

No one cared about the pain of the Southern Kingdom. In their eyes she deserved everything that had happened to her. Why did they feel this way? She had treated

the surrounding nations worse than she was being treated; therefore, they knew exactly what her pain felt like. No one had pity on her.

### **Faint Judah**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>13</sup> "From on high He sent fire into my bones, / And it prevailed *over them*. / He has spread a net for my feet; / He has turned me back; / He has made me desolate, / Faint all day long.

Even the Lord was no help in their time of need. The nations would not help them and neither would the Lord. Their food was gone, their money and trading power were gone and their strength was gone.

### **Captive Judah**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>14</sup> "The yoke of my transgressions is bound; / By His hand they are knit together. / They have come upon my neck; / He has made my strength fail. / The Lord has given me into the hands / Of *those against whom* I am not able to stand.

The whole plan for the Southern Kingdom was designed by the Lord. He had arranged everything. He had placed His people where He wanted them, in exile.

### **Lord's Rejection**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>15</sup> "The Lord has rejected all my strong men / In my midst; He has called an appointed time against me / To crush my young men; / The Lord has trodden *as in* a wine press / The virgin daughter of Judah.

At the Lord's appointed time, in 586 BC, the Lord sent Babylon to crush the nation. The fierceness of the battle is compared to the virgins of Judah bursting the grapes with their feet. In the same way, Babylon burst the warriors of Judah under their feet, spewing their blood on the countryside.

### **Judah in Tears**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>16</sup> "For these things I weep; / My eyes run down with water; / Because far from me is a comforter, / One who restores my soul. / My children are desolate / Because the enemy has prevailed."

The Southern Kingdom could only weep for the loss of her valiant men. They had left the Lord; therefore, the enemy prevailed.

### **No Comforter**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>17</sup> Zion stretches out her hands; / There is no one to comfort her; / The LORD has commanded concerning Jacob / That the ones round about him should be his adversaries; / Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them.

The Lord commanded that Israel be friendless. The Lord commanded that Jerusalem be friendless. The Lord commanded that Jerusalem be a stench among all people.

### **Virgins and Men in Captivity**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>18</sup> "The LORD is righteous; / For I have rebelled against His command; / Hear now, all peoples, / And behold my pain; / My virgins and my young men / Have gone into captivity.

For its sin, the Southern Kingdom had to admit that no one was left in the kingdom to carry on its legacy. It was a painful reality to the old and poor left behind.

### **Priest and Elders Perished**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>19</sup> "I called to my lovers, / *but* they deceived me; / My priests and my elders perished in the city / While they sought food / to restore their strength themselves.

The Southern Kingdom sought out every nation around them for help when they were being attacked by the Lord and His workman, Babylon. The leaders of the kingdom tried in vain to renew their strength, but the majority of them perished.

### **Judah's Distress**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>20</sup> "See, O LORD, for I am in distress; / My spirit is greatly troubled; / My heart is overturned within me, / For I have been very rebellious. / In the street the sword slays; / In the house it is like death.

The nation was in distress. The greater the trouble, the harder and faster the heart beats. The reason for the distress was rebellion. Notice the progression from being distressed to being troubled, to suffering from heartache, to being struck by the sword and finally, to dying in the home. Judah's sin led to her death.

### **Enemies Rejoice**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>21</sup> "They have heard that I groan; / There is no one to comfort me; / All my enemies have heard of my calamity; / They are glad that You have done *it*. / Oh, that You would bring the day which You have proclaimed, / That they may become like me.

The whole known world knew about the fall of the Southern Kingdom and they could not have been happier. Perhaps the whole known world was aware that the God of Israel was the God of their destruction. Jeremiah, who was writing this lamentation for Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, knew that God would ultimately punish those whom He used to punish His own people. They were also sinners against God and Jeremiah, speaking for the kingdom, pleads for the day when their enemies will be punished by that same God.

### **Plea for Revenge**

**Lamentations 1:**<sup>22</sup> "Let all their wickedness come before You; / And deal with them as You have dealt with me / For all my transgressions; / For my groans are many and my heart is faint."

Finally, the kingdom had been brought to her knees before God. She recognized her sin but it was too late to receive the Lord's compassion. In her distress, she could only pray for the kindness of the Lord in the future and plea for revenge against each the ungodly nation, who hated her, tempted her, lied to her, raped her, spit on her, taunted her, and began to steal her Promised Land.