



Lamentations (Part 1)

Eicha (איכה): The Book of “How”

The book of Lamentations begins with the word *eicha* (איכה), translated “how.” The word is used in Hebrew both as a question word (as in, how did this happen?) and an exclamation (oh, how did this happen!). It is a genre marker, in part, indicating that what follows will be a lament poem. The word is repeated throughout. There are a variety of similar exclamations with different meanings that can be found in other biblical poems (e.g., psalms declaring “how great are you, God”). In Lamentations, *eicha* is a poetic response to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. It emphasizes the incomprehensibility of this tragedy. *How could something like this happen to us?* The question is both rhetorical and sincere. While the speaker may not expect a response, they still want to know the answer.

Lamentations attempts to make sense of the loss of the temple, the loss of the land, and above all the loss of God’s dwelling place among the people. The Babylonian invasion and subsequent exile of the Jewish people are not explicitly referenced in the poem. Lamentations also does not include an ascription attributing the poem to a particular patron or author. Although it has traditionally been ascribed to Jeremiah, there is no evidence to support Jeremiah’s authorship. In fact, Lamentations could have had several authors. Each of its five chapters are distinct in character and tone. It arguably reads more like a collection of poems than a single work.

Blending Genres

The book of Lamentations has been influenced by multiple ancient literary forms, including funerary dirges and Mesopotamian city laments. Many perceive Lamentations to be a visceral reaction in the immediate aftermath of Jerusalem’s destruction. The raw emotion of this poem leads some to treat it as a historical document reporting from the scene of the invasion. Mesopotamian city laments, however, were not written in the wake of destruction. They were created after the fact for the rededication of a temple once it had been restored. This does not necessarily mean that Lamentations was written at a much later date. It is worth remembering, however, that this work is likely playing with and adapting mechanisms for meaning-making from a variety of genres.

An Acrostic Poem

In Hebrew, the first four chapters of Lamentations are acrostic poems. English translations are unable to capture this aspect of the text. Each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet (22 total). There are many possible reasons why Lamentations might have adopted this structure. Acrostic poems are occasionally used as tools for learning and memorization. Some also see the acrostic as an expression of completeness (i.e., alpha to omega). Yet grief is a cyclical experience and traumatic memories are often disjointed.

Interestingly, the structure of each acrostic poem varies depending on the chapter. In chapters one, two, and four, for example, only the first letter of each verse is part of the acrostic. Yet in Lamentations 3, all three lines of each verse begin with the same letter in alphabetical order (i.e. verse 1: א / א / א , verse 2: ב / ב / ב, etc.). Lamentations 2-4 also feature a more antiquated version of the Hebrew alphabet than Lamentations 1.

Although Lamentations 5 is not an acrostic, it is still 22 lines long. Perhaps the absence of the acrostic structure in this final chapter recognizes the incomprehensibility of Jerusalem's devastation. In the end, a single poem cannot contain the immensity of this community's pain. Grief and trauma cannot be ordered within an arbitrary literary device.