

# Lament (קינה) Form

## Introduction

Laments or dirges are a form of poetic speech whose theme is complaint and whose function is to mourn the loss of a beloved individual, of a battle, or of a community's city and temple. Laments can be individual or communal, distinguished by the use of first person singular (I) or plural (We).

## Structure

### Formal Elements

Element	Example (Psalm 74)
1. Invocation	
a. invocation of God	<sup>1</sup> Why, God
b. short question	have you cast us off forever? Why does your anger burn against the sheep of your pasture?
c. description of past favor	<sup>2</sup> Remember your flock that you gathered of old, the tribe you redeemed as your very own. Remember Mount Zion where you dwell.
2. Lament (description of present devastation)	
a. assertion of innocence	<sup>4</sup> Your foes roared triumphantly in your shrine; they set up their own tokens of victory.... <sup>7</sup> They set your sanctuary on fire; the abode of your name they razed and profaned....
b. profession of confidence	<sup>12</sup> Yet you, God, are my king from of old, winning victories throughout the earth....
3. Petition	
a. vows of praise	<sup>19</sup> Do not surrender to beasts those who praise you; do not forget forever the life of your afflicted.... <sup>22</sup> Arise, God, defend your cause; remember the constant jeers of the fools.
b. oracle of salvation	<sup>23</sup> Do not ignore the clamor of your foes, the unceasing uproar of your enemies.
4. Reversal of fortune	(not found in biblical laments)

### Poetic Features

1. <i>Qinah</i> Meter:	Some laments are written in a "limping" meter: that is, the first cola or unit of the line has several more syllables than the (usually parallel) second cola. Amos 5:2 נפלה לא תוסיף קום בתולת ישראל נטשה על אדמתה אין מקימה She is fallen, to rise no more the virgin Israel She lies abandoned upon her land with no one to raise her up.
2. Parallelism:	The cola (half lines) repeat each other in theme, content, structure, or sound. This pattern also occurs between lines, so that the second line parallels the first.
3. Acrostic format:	The structure of the piece follows that of the alphabet (Lam 1–4: first letter of each stanza begins with each letter of the alphabet in turn; cf. Pss 9–10; 25; 34; 37; 111–112; 119; 145; Prov 31:10–31).

## Content

Because laments mourn loss, they usually include not only a description of the present devastation, but also a description of how much better things had been.

## Function

The communal laments that appear in the Bible were originally sung in public liturgies during times of national calamity or distress. Individual laments (Pss 3; 5–7; 13; 22) could be sung in any location on the occasion of all manner of personal calamity (persecution, imprisonment, sickness).

## For Further Practice

Isa 63:15–19  
Pss 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; 83; 89

Amos 5:2  
Dan 9

Job 3:1–10; 10:1–7  
Matt 23:37–39