

COMMENTARY ON ECCLESIASTES

I. VANITY OF VANITIES (TITLE AND THEME) (1:1-2)

BEHIND THE TEXT

The opening sentence of Ecclesiastes is the superscript and functions as a kind of title page for the book. The first word or words of a Hebrew book are often used as the title, and so these are chosen carefully. The Hebrew title of Ecclesiastes is the second word, *qōhelet* (**Teacher**). Like the superscripts of other OT books, v 1 was probably added by an editor or scribe to identify the book.

The mention of the **son of David, king in Jerusalem** calls to mind Solomon in all his glory, but there are reasons to think that Ecclesiastes comes from a later time, the Persian or Hellenistic period (see Authorship and Date sections in the Introduction).

The first two verses of Ecclesiastes establish the editorial framework and theme for the book. Verse 1 is the title of the book and v 2 introduces the theme of the book. The phrase “vanity of vanities” (קִיץ) (*hābēl hābālim*, **Meaningless! Meaningless!**) is a literary device indicating the greatest or best of something (e.g., Song of Songs). It also forms an inclusio with its counterpart in 12:8. Though v 2 sets the tone, the declaration of **Meaningless!** is not followed in an absolute sense by the rest of the book. Rather, this declaration is explained with examples from the complexity and, often, ambiguity of life.

The Words of the Teacher

Editorial titles for OT books or collections often begin with **the words of x** or a similar formula. The book of Proverbs begins with “The proverbs of Solomon” and also has collections introduced as “The sayings of Agur,” “The sayings of King Lemuel,” “Sayings of the wise,” and “These are more proverbs of Solomon” (Prov 1:1; 30:1; 31:1; 22:17; 25:1). Prophetic books also use this formula, for example, “The words of Jeremiah” and “The words of Amos” (Jer 1:1; Amos 1:1). A similar formula is found in the Egyptian Wisdom literature called “instructions,” for example, “The instruction of the Mayor and Vizier Ptahhotep” (Pritchard 1969, 412).

IN THE TEXT

A. Title (1:1)

■ Verse 1 introduces the content of the book as **the words of the Teacher** (*qōhelet*). *Qōhelet* is a word unique to Ecclesiastes and derives from the noun *qāhāl*, which means “assembly, convocation” (BDB 874). Thus *qōhelet* is “convener [of an assembly]” or “collector (of sentences)” (BDB 875 [although the verb is never used for collecting objects]). BDB identifies this as a masculine noun, but it has a feminine noun ending, and it takes the masculine verb (except in 7:27, which could be a scribal error). Ginsburg explained the feminine form by suggesting that Solomon was the personification of wisdom, which is a feminine noun in Hebrew (1861, 7; so Augustine and others). However, there are other cases of an office using a feminine form, even though the holder of the office is male (*soferet*, scribe, Ezra 2:55), and also of males whose names have a feminine form (Alemeth, 1 Chr 7:8). Moore’s translation is “the Worship Leader,” which is based partly on Solomon’s dedication of the temple in 1 Kgs 8 (2001, 17, 117). Leading worship is not a function of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes. Another suggestion is “arguer,” based on Aramaic vocabulary (Ullendorff 1962, 215).

The Septuagint translated *qōhelet* with the Greek word *Ekklesiastou* (“member of the political assembly”). The translation “Preacher” (ESV) is mis-

leading because Qoheleth was not the preacher in a church or other religious gathering.

Instead of an office or function, *qōhelet* could be a pseudonym or a nickname (Lohfink 2003, 10). In one or two uses of the word, the article is used (“the Qoheleth,” 12:8 and probably 7:27), which would be unusual for a personal name. However, Ecclesiastes also uses *qōhelet* as a personal name in 1:12 and 12:9-10. There is no son of David or any other known person with the name *qōhelet*, although the verbal form is used with Solomon as subject in 1 Kgs 8:1. Ginsburg thought that *qōhelet* was used in order to present Solomon as an ideal and not as the actual author (1861, 244-45).

This commentary will use “Qoheleth” to refer to the author of the book and “Ecclesiastes” to refer to the book as a whole.

The phrase **son of David, king in Jerusalem** clearly points to Solomon, even though it is not a reliable indicator of Solomonic authorship. Solomon was considered the father of wisdom in ancient Israel, and his request for wisdom in 1 Kgs 3:3-15 is well known. In the list of Solomon’s accomplishments he is also credited with writing three thousand proverbs and one thousand and five songs (1 Kgs 4:32). He is connected with the book of Proverbs, Song of Songs, and the apocryphal book Wisdom of Solomon.

B. Theme (1:2)

■2 Verse 2 establishes the theme of the book with Qoheleth’s declaration, “Meaningless! Meaningless!” The meaning of the Hebrew word underlying **meaningless** (*hebel*) is difficult to convey in English. The context must determine which meaning is intended in any given verse. In this thematic verse, the context is the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole, thus it carries the rich connotations of the different uses. These meanings can be summarized as futile, unattainable, evil, fleeting, profitless, inconsequential, ineffective, and incomprehensible (see Introduction).

The literal meaning of *hebel* is *breath, vapor*. Breath is not by nature meaningless. It is essential for life. It is, however, brief, and while it is satisfying to breathe, breathing must be a continuous activity if life is to be sustained. So an individual breath gives no lasting satisfaction, but there must be more. Likewise, breathing is not an end in itself but is merely a means to life. This is the nature of life. It is filled with good things that are, by their nature, temporary, and that may be satisfying but are not an end in themselves. The Hebrew word *hebel* is a suitable vehicle for this aspect of life, which Qoheleth wishes to convey. The pleasures and accomplishments of life are meaningful, but they do not provide ultimate meaning. That is to be found in relationship with God.

Hebel (Meaningless)

The noun *hebel* is used thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes and thirty-five times elsewhere in the OT. The literal meaning is *vapor, breath*, which is seen in Isa 57:13 where *hebel* is used in parallel with “wind.” The wind or breath will carry the idols away. The figurative meaning is “vanity” in the sense of insubstantial or worthless (BDB 210), and thus refers to something that evaporates (Ginsburg 1861, 259). This is relevant in the case of idols that “will perish” (Jer 10:15). The books of Deuteronomy, Kings, and Jeremiah often use *hebel* with the meaning “worthless idols” (e.g., Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13; Jer 2:5). Isaiah denounced the military help of Egypt as *hebel* in the sense of “useless” (Isa 30:7). The word is also used in parallel with “nothing” (*tōhū*) in Isa 49:4. The name “Abel” is *hebel* in Hebrew and shows the meaning of “temporary” as his life was so short (having been murdered by his brother Cain). The same root is used as a verb five times (2 Kgs 17:15; Job 27:12; Ps 62:10; Jer 2:5; 23:16).

The phrase “vanity of vanities” (KJV) (*hābēl hābālim, Meaningless! Meaningless!*) follows a Hebrew idiom that expresses the superlative. Other examples are “Song of Songs” (*the best song*), “heaven of heavens” (KJV) (“highest heaven,” 1 Kgs 8:27), “servant of servants” (KJV) (“the lowest of slaves,” Gen 9:25), and “holy of holies” (NASB) (the “Most Holy Place,” Exod 26:33). The superlative nature of “vanity of vanities” seems out of place as the rest of the book uses this vocabulary for various aspects of life but not as a blanket assessment of life as a whole (except as an inclusio to the whole book in 12:8). This may be an indication that v 2 (and 12:8) was added by the final editor (so Rashbam; Japhet and Salters 1985, 92, 212). Another reason it seems to be an editorial addition is that Qoheleth is referred to in the third person.

Verse 2 also seems to indicate that the significance of what Qoheleth observes about life and nature is not limited to his generation. The Hebrew verb *’amar* (says) is in the perfect, which is usually translated with the past tense. However, it can also refer to an event that is viewed as a whole, even though it may not be completed at the time of writing. The present tense translation **says** emphasizes the continuing relevance and validity of Qoheleth’s conclusions (Crenshaw 1987, 58).

Verse 2 concludes with the phrase, **Everything is meaningless**. The Hebrew word *kōl* (*everything* or *all*) is found throughout the book, in about ninety-one verses out of the two hundred twenty-two verses of the book. The predominant use of this word in Qoheleth conveys a universal perspective and Qoheleth’s concern with “all of life,” as he reflects on the meaning of life (Towner 1997, 278).

Verse 2 serves not only as the theme or motto for the whole book but also as the opening statement for the introduction (1:3-11). This introduction does not use the word *hebel* but describes the continuous activity of nature,

the lack of novelty, and the lack of remembrance. The author describes the activities in vv 3-11 as *hebel*, which in the context may be taken to mean “incomprehensible, ineffective.” The impact of the alliteration in v 2 is striking. There is a preponderance of “h” and “l” sounds, not least because of the repetition of the word *hebel* (five times in eight words): *hābēl hābālim ʾāmar qōhelet hābēl hābālim hakkōl hābel*. The very sound of the sentence has a continuous and incomprehensible nature to it. This alliteration serves to emphasize the continuous nature and incomprehensibility of the activities described in vv 3-11.

FROM THE TEXT

For the author of Ecclesiastes Solomon is a prime example of someone who had great wisdom and wealth but who failed to grasp the real meaning of life. While the descriptions of Solomon’s wisdom and wealth in 1 Kings are superlative, he ended his life away from God, entrapped by the very pleasures that were available to him because of his wisdom and wealth. Thus the example of Solomon serves as a dire warning to those who would make wisdom and wealth an end in themselves and thus risk losing the real meaning of life: a right relationship with God and contentment with whatever God in his sovereignty has apportioned to each one. However, for most people in ancient Israel, life on earth was not meaningless, though in their faith there was no clear development of the idea of an afterlife. The faithful in Israel were committed to living their life to the fullest in the here and now. Qoheleth does not say that life in the final analysis is “meaningless” or “absurd.” While he viewed life as temporary and incomprehensible, he also regarded it as a gift from God that is to be valued and lived to the full. It is this perception of life that leads us to find contentment in Christ. This is what Paul seems to be saying when he writes: “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil 4:11; see also Phil 1:21-26). Living life to the full in submission to God is the antidote to despair and meaninglessness.

A picture of vanity: The still-life painting style known as “*vanitas*,” from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Northern Europe is often accompanied by the motto from Eccl 1:2 in Latin. The paintings are intended to convey the transient and fragile nature of life by means of symbols such as skulls, bubbles, musical instruments, and hourglasses (Leppert 1996, 57-58).

ECCLESIASTES
1:1-2

COMMENTARY ON LAMENTATIONS

I. POEM ONE: HOW DESERTED (1:1-22)

1:1-22

BEHIND THE TEXT

The first poem in Lamentations sets the tone of a deserted city facing the hardships and humiliation of defeat. This chapter introduces the main themes of sin and pleading to God. The second poem (ch 2) will intensify these themes with a focus on God's anger.

Lamentations 1 was classified as a funeral song by Gunkel (1933, 95). The opening word, **How**, and the reversal of fortunes are consistent with this, but the city itself is not said to be dead and there is no invitation to join the mourning. There are several elements of the city lament in ch 1: the word **How** (1:1); finding no rest (1:3); cessation of celebrations (1:4); **fire** from heaven (1:13); spreading a **net** (1:13); the collapse of civic order and the deity as the cause of the disaster (1:5) (McDaniel 1968, 201-2; Bergant 2002, 11).

The acrostic poems of Lamentations are carefully composed and yet, apart from the alphabetic form, they do not have a clear outline of form or content (or the structure is frequently interrupted). The outlines of individual poems offered here are therefore very generalized. Chapter 1 can be outlined as follows:

How Deserted Lies the City (1:1-11)

Look at My Suffering! (1:12-22)

IN THE TEXT

In the ancient translations, v 1 is preceded by information about Jeremiah as the author of the book. There is no mention of this in the Hebrew manuscripts and no other direct evidence of authorship (see Authorship section in the Introduction).

A. How Deserted Lies the City (1:1-11)

■ **Alef.** The first verse of the book of Lamentations gives the setting for the entire book, presumably the deserted city of Jerusalem following its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. The city has experienced major reversals in terms of size and honor. In Hebrew the opening word, **How**, begins with *alef*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so this verse begins the acrostic structure that characterizes the first four chapters. Like many Hebrew books, the first word is the Hebrew name of the book (*ʿēkā*) and also begins the poems in chs 2 and 4 (and is used in 4:2). The same form and usage of this word is found elsewhere only in Isa 1:21 and Jer 48:17. In Isaiah it is also the city of Jerusalem, which is lamented (specifically the loss of justice), and in Jeremiah the exclamation is for the defeat of the neighboring nation Moab. The word can also be used as a question (“how?”). The few uses of *ʿēkā* as an exclamation are all in laments.

The word **deserted** is ironic because this word (*bādād*) can also have the figurative meaning of “security” in the sense of “freedom from attack” (Deut 33:28; Jer 49:31; BDB 94-95). Jerusalem felt secure under Yahweh’s protection but is now isolated and alone.

A repetition of vocabulary in v 1 is obscured in translation; **once so full** and **once was great** are the same word in Hebrew (*rabbāti*; see 2:6, 20 for other examples of homonyms in the same verse). Both meanings are within the usual range of the word, although **great** (that is, “large”) is less frequent (BDB 913). This choice of words allows repetition in the first two lines of v 1 (each verse has three lines). The form *rabbāti* used in both instances is unusual, and the final *yod* is thought to be an ancient genitive case ending (GKC §90*l*). The archaic form does not indicate an ancient text (like it might for archaic poetry such as that found in Judg 5) but must have been chosen for poetic reasons.

McDaniel suggests that the translation should be “lady, mistress” following the use of this root in cognate languages (Phoenician, Ugaritic, and Punic; cited by Provan 1991, 35). This would give a translation “the city was a mistress of people . . . a lady among the nations.” Biblical use of the word, however, favors the traditional translation and emphasizes the contrast better, without losing the feminine imagery for Jerusalem (**widow, queen**).

The city of Jerusalem is compared to a **widow**, which implied very low status in ancient Israel. With no social welfare system, widows were left destitute unless they had adult sons or other family support. Along with disadvantaged classes, such as resident aliens and orphans, widows were too often subject to oppression (see Isa 10:1-2), and special laws were in force to protect them (Deut 10:17-19; 24:17-22; 27:19). Isaiah also compared conquered Jerusalem to a widow, but in that case the prophecy is one of renewal, and widowhood is to be left behind (Isa 54:4; King and Stager 2001, 53).

Bergant has noted the significance of the personification of Jerusalem as a woman (**widow, queen**) (2003, 28). The city walls enclose the population as a mother’s womb encloses a child. But the city-mother is no longer full of children, bereft like a widow.

Isaiah 54:4-6

“Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame.
 Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.
 You will forget the shame of your youth
 and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.
 For your Maker is your husband—
 the LORD Almighty is his name—
 the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
 he is called the God of all the earth.
 The LORD will call you back
 as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—
 a wife who married young,
 only to be rejected,” says your God.

The word for **queen** (*śārāṭī*) does not specifically denote a sovereign ruler, or the wife of a king. *Śārāṭī* is the feminine form of a more general word for a chief or ruler, regardless of lineage. In the feminine form it is used for women who are nobility or daughters of kings (1 Kgs 11:3; Esth 1:18; Judg 5:29; Isa 49:23).

From this high status as a ruler among the nations and cities, Jerusalem has fallen to the status of **slave**. This is not the usual word for slave (*‘ebed*) but is a group of laborers (*maś*). Jerusalem was already a vassal of Babylon. Its situ-

ation is now worse with even less independence. The term is also applied to Israel's slavery in Egypt (Exod 1:11; see Deut 20:11; Isa 31:8).

■ **2 Bet.** Adding to the loneliness and shame of defeat, v 2 decries the lack of comforters for Jerusalem (see 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21; Jer 31:15). The same vocabulary is used in Isa 40 to call for comforters for the people of defeated Jerusalem (see Isa 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12; 52:9).

Jerusalem's loneliness is intensified by the fact that her **lovers** and **friends** have become her betrayers and **enemies**. The word **lovers** perhaps refers to pagan deities (see Jer 2:25, 28, 33). Jerusalem sought **friends** (political allies) among the Assyrians during the days of King Ahaz, and apparently among the Egyptians during the days of Jeremiah. But these "friends" were not real friends as they were more concerned with their own interests. Isaiah portrayed trusting Egypt as leaning on a "splintered reed of a staff" (Isa 36:6). Jerusalem has entered into these relationships unwisely and found her **friends** and **lovers** treacherous associates who cannot comfort her. The theme of treacherous friends is common in laments (e.g., Ps 38:11; Provan 1991, 13, 37). The word **enemies** occurs frequently in the book (1:2, 5, 9, 16, 21; 2:3, 4, 5, 7, 16, 17, 22; 3:46, 52; 4:12). The similar sound of the Hebrew words for **lovers** (*ʾōhēb*) and **enemies** (*ʾōyēb*) emphasizes the reversal of Jerusalem's experience. The people of Jerusalem are suffering the consequence of their failure to trust in God for their security and welfare. They rejected God and now they are being rejected by the nations they trusted.

■ **3 Gimel.** The Hebrew of v 3 reads literally as follows: *Judah was exiled from affliction and harsh labor*. The Targum took this to mean that exile came *because (min)* Jerusalem oppressed orphans (Brady 2003, 33-34). But elsewhere the verb *exile* followed by *min* means "exiled out of" (1 Sam 4:21-22; Ezek 12:3; Mic 1:16; Berlin 2002, 45). This suggests that the exile followed the suffering and leads to the translation **After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile**. The last phrase exaggerates the situation for effect as only a portion of the population was deported (Provan 1991, 14, 38).

Judah **dwells among the nations** reiterates the condition of the exile of the nation. Moreover, in her condition of exile, **she finds no resting place**. This is a reversal of the promised rest in the land (Deut 12:9; Ps 95:11). The precise meaning of the last line (**All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress**) is not clear. The word **distress** (*mēšārīm*) comes from a verb that can mean "cramped, narrow" (Bergant 2003, 32). The reading in the New Jerusalem Bible, "her persecutors all overtake her where there is no way out," conveys the idea of Judah in a dangerous condition. **Distress** (*mēšārīm*) also sounds like the Hebrew for "Egypt" (*mišrayim*), which could be intended to recall the slavery in Egypt (Berlin 2002, 51). Goldman suggested that the

reference is not to Babylonian exile, but to those who retreated to Egypt at that time (1946, 71).

The Deserted City by C. G. A. Roberts (1893)

*There lies a little city leagues away.
Its wharves the green sea washes all day long.
Its busy, sun-bright wharves with sailors' song
And clamour of trade ring loud the live-long day.
Into the happy harbour hastening, gay
With press of snowy canvas, tall ships throng.
The peopled streets to blithe-eyed Peace belong.
Glad housed beneath these crowding roofs of grey.*

*'Twas long ago this city prospered so,
For yesterday a woman died therein.
Since when the wharves are idle fallen, I know,
And in the streets is hushed the pleasant din;
The thronging ships have been, the songs have been;—
Since yesterday it is so long ago.*

■ **4 Dalet.** Verse 4 continues the desolate and abandoned condition of Jerusalem. **The roads to Zion mourn** because of the lack of pilgrims coming to the feasts in Jerusalem. The book of Exodus required attendance at three feasts every year: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (or Passover) celebrating the beginning of the barley harvest and the commemoration of the exodus from Egypt; the Feast of Harvest (or Weeks) marking the end of the wheat harvest and later connected with the giving of the Ten Commandments; and the Feast of Ingathering (or Tabernacles), which marked the end of the fruit harvest and commemorated the time in the wilderness (Exod 23:14-17). Lamentations so far has not identified sin as the cause of the disaster, but the Targum charged that the roads to Zion were empty precisely because the people had not kept the pilgrim festivals (Brady 2003, 35-36). Jerusalem is called by the poetic name **Zion**, which is technically the stronghold of the Jebusites and which David captured and renamed “the City of David” (2 Sam 5:7; 1 Kgs 8:1).

In a walled city like Jerusalem, the gates were a meeting place. The destruction of Jerusalem brought an end to such gathering of people in the **gateways** and they remained as **desolate** places. The **priests groan** because they have lost their work and livelihood with the destruction of the temple and the cessation of worship (see Joel 1:9). The **maidens** of Jerusalem grieve because the destruction of the city meant an end of festivities, song, and dance in the streets of Jerusalem (see Jer 31:13). The Septuagint has the maidens dragged away, which may reflect the general displacement of the population or may have in mind the frequent treatment of women as plunder in the ancient

world. The city itself, personified as a woman, is in **bitter anguish**, because of the loss of population and destruction and devastation all around the city.

■ **5 He.** Verse 5 continues the lament on the reversal of fortunes. Jerusalem is ruled by its **enemies** who are now **at ease**. The word **foe** occurs at the beginning and end of v 5, “linguistically surrounding and capturing Zion and her suffering children just as the foes surround the city” (O’Connor 2002, 21). Foes becoming **masters** (lit., *head*) echoes the covenant curse in Deut 28:44 (see 28:13), which warns of aliens becoming the head and Israel the tail if the nation fails to live in faithful relation to Yahweh. Lamentations 1:5 acknowledges the reality that Jerusalem’s present condition is the work of Yahweh even though Babylon is the political agent that destroyed Jerusalem. This type of theological interpretation of historical events is common in the Bible. Though the immediate causes of an event may be clearly known, the biblical tradition often recognizes God as the ultimate cause. For example, in the prologue section of the book of Job, readers are first introduced to the role of the Satan in Job’s suffering, but then the narrative identifies the Sabeteans, lightning, the Chaldeans, a mighty wind, and illness as the immediate causes. However, Job claims that God is the one who gives and takes away his blessings (Job 1:21). In the case of the destruction of Jerusalem, there is a connection between the historical and theological realities. It was the same rebellious spirit of the people of Judah, which led to both their rejection of Yahweh and their refusal to submit to Babylon (which brought the retaliation of the Babylonians). If they had a healthy relationship with God, their international relationships would also have been very different.

Verse 5 also makes clear the reason for Yahweh bringing grief to Jerusalem. This condition is the consequence of **her many sins** (*pěšā’ēhā*). The OT often uses the word *pěšā’* for political rebellion (e.g., 1 Kgs 12:19). This admission of guilt and culpability by the lamenting community also implies its recognition that it is experiencing discipline from God rather than punishment or retribution (see Ambrose in Wenthe 2009, 290). God was not trying to get back at them, but to get them back. The destruction of Jerusalem and exile was part of this discipline.

Annals of Ashurbanipal, Rassam Cylinder

Famine broke out among them and they ate the flesh of their children against their hunger. Ashur, Sin, Shamash, Adad, Bel, Nebo, the Ishtar of Nineveh—the Queen of Kidmuri—the Ishtar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal (and) Nusku (thus) inflicted quickly upon them (all) the curses written (down) in their sworn agreements. . . . Whenever the inhabitants of Arabia asked each other: “On account of what have these calamities befallen Arabia?” (they answered themselves): “Because we did not keep the solemn oaths (sworn by) Ashur, because we offended the friendliness of Ashurbanipal, the king, beloved by Ellil!” (Pritchard 1969, 300)

■ **6 Waw.** Verse 6 portrays Jerusalem as a city that has lost its **splendor** and likens it to a **deer** fleeing from hunters. The Septuagint, assuming a different vocalization, translated **deer** (*ʿayyālīm*) as “rams” (*ʿēlīm*), giving the image of sheep before a drover, rather than deer before a hunter. The translation **Daughter of Zion** is misleading because it gives the impression that a subset of Jerusalem is in view, when in fact it is a term of endearment signifying the population of Jerusalem as a whole (Hillers 1972, xxxviii). The phrase (or a variation) is used twenty times in the book, sixteen times in Jeremiah, and about ten times elsewhere (Berlin 2002, 10). It may originate from the ancient Near Eastern idea of a patron goddess of the city (O’Connor 2002, 14, citing Dobbs-Allsopp). The Targum preferred the translation “congregation of Israel” (*kēneśset*; Brady 2003, 84). **Princes** (*šar*) is not specifically the sons of the king, but a general term for leaders or rulers.

■ **7 Zayin.** In the midst of **affliction and wandering** Jerusalem **remembers all the treasures** she once had in the past. The remembrance of the past prompts Jerusalem to lament over the loss of her treasures. The word **affliction** is often used in connection with a sojourner or foreigner (*gēr*), representing the poor and disenfranchised in the land (e.g., Lev 19:10). However, if the consonants have been mistakenly transposed, the correct root could be *yārad*, “to go down,” which is found in the form of a noun *môrād* (i.e., the consonants *mrwd* instead of *mrwd*). This word usually means a slope or a descending road (e.g., Jer 48:5). This would make the reference in Lam 1:7 to Jerusalem’s **affliction and fall** or descent from honor (or the descent of the population as they leave the city). Verse 9 uses the same root to refer to the fall of Jerusalem. **Wandering** (*mērūdēhā*) in v 7 is rare and of uncertain meaning. Some ancient versions render it “rebel” while the Septuagint offers “rejection, thrusting away.” The RSV emends the consonants to translate as “bitterness.” The translation **wandering** assumes the root *rūd*, which, if correct, could imply the **wandering** or traveling of Jerusalem’s residents into exile.

Peake suggested that the line **all the treasures that were hers in days of old** is probably an addition to the text (1911, 305). Verse 7 has four lines, while other verses in the book have three lines each, which suggests that one of these four lines may have been added by a scribe. The phrase **days of old** uses the root meaning “in front of” (*qedem*) reflecting the Hebrew conception that one backs into the future. This is logical as the past is known, but the future is not. English usage parallels this, as the word “before” refers not only to the past but also to what is in front. Lamentations ends with uncertainty about what the future may hold.

The second part of v 7 reiterates the abandoned condition of Jerusalem’s population. No one came to rescue or help the people when the enemy invaded the land. Jerusalem’s humiliation included the laughter of Judah’s neighbor-

ing nations and historic enemies (see Obad 11-13). The word for **destruction** (*mšbathā*) is used only here in the OT. Ancient versions translate the word as “settlement, dwelling” or “deportation, captivity.” Dead Sea Scrolls have “her ruins” (*mšbrh*). A translation such as “demise” would be appropriate.

■ **8 Khet.** Verse 8 acknowledges the grievous sin of Jerusalem (**Jerusalem has sinned greatly**). Jerusalem’s sins have made the holy city an unclean place. The Hebrew word for **unclean** (*lēnidā*) is used only here in the OT and could be understood in three ways. The first is the sense “wander” (assuming the root *nwd* with the Dead Sea Scrolls), which fits well as a consequence of sin (as Cain was sent to Nod, the land of wandering; Gen 4:12-16). The second is “derision” (from the same root), which fits well with the following line where people **despise** Zion. The third is an emendation giving the translation **unclean**, which fits well with the following verse. All three readings are helpful as the argument progresses (Berlin 2002, 54).

Verse 8 continues the theme of Jerusalem’s humiliation. Once Jerusalem held a place of honor among the nations; now she is a despised and naked city. **Nakedness** conveys the idea of great shame and humiliation. It is also an image of being conquered and led into slavery (Isa 47:3; Jer 13:26; Nah 3:5). Verse 8 ends with the portrait of Jerusalem groaning because of rejection, humiliation, and loss of honor among the nations.

■ **9 Tet.** Verse 9 continues the theme of Jerusalem’s uncleanness. **Her filthiness clung to her skirts** (*tum’ātāh bēšūlēhā*) conveys the idea that Jerusalem has become an unclean place through idolatry and foreign alliances. The word **skirts** (*bēšūlēhā*) here refers to the hem or lower part of the robe (Exod 28:33). **Filthiness** (*tum’ātāh*) often refers to ritual impurities such as menstruation (Brady 2003, 76). Here it refers to promiscuity (Berlin 2002, 54).

Verse 9 ends with Jerusalem’s appeal to Yahweh to pay attention to its affliction. The first person form, **my affliction** (*‘ānēyī*), is unusual in a poem that has a third person perspective, speaking *about* Jerusalem and its fate. Hence the editors of BHS suggest reading “her affliction.” But the first person form gives a personal force to the outcry to Yahweh, and the Hebrew text makes sense in its current form. The prayer for Yahweh to **look** on Jerusalem’s **affliction** conveys hope; in the past Yahweh had seen Israel’s affliction when the people were slaves in Egypt and saved them from their affliction (Exod 3:7). The appeal also conveys trust in Yahweh’s power to save his people from their affliction.

■ **10 Yod.** Verse 10 decries the entry of foreigners into the temple to plunder its treasures. Temples were a common location of wealth, and invaders would always carry golden vessels away. Later the book of Daniel condemned Belshazzar for irreverently using these holy vessels as drinking cups in his banquet (Dan 5:2-3). The repeated occurrence of such events (e.g., illegal

temple entry in 597, 586, and 167 B.C.) has prompted Provan to challenge the usual interpretation of the 586 B.C. fall of Jerusalem as the occasion of Lamentations (1991, 13). Those who were **forbidden to enter your assembly** are apparently the Ammonites and Moabites of Deut 23:3 and, by extension, the Babylonians.

■ **11 Kaf.** Verse 11 documents the shortage of food during the siege of the city. During such times, people traded their hoarded material possessions to buy food and to **keep themselves alive**. Wealth is of no other value to someone who is starving (see Matt 16:26). There is another call in this verse for Yahweh to **look and consider** (*wěhabbîû*) the plight of Jerusalem (see 1:9).

B. Look at My Suffering! (1:12-22)

■ **12 Lamed.** Verse 12 asks, **Is it nothing to you?** as none of the hypothetical observers offer any comfort (see vv 2, 9, etc.). Provan renders this question as “Is it not for you?” implying that Jerusalem’s suffering is to help others avoid the consequences of disobedience (1991, 48). This can only be a peripheral purpose of the suffering, however, and the line could be a wish, “May it never happen to you” (Harrison 1973, 210), or more likely just a statement, “It is not for you (to be concerned about)” (see Albrektson 1963, 68-69). Passersby are more likely to mock than to comfort, and this is a common feature in laments (e.g., Ps 89:41). Obadiah condemned neighboring Edom for rejoicing at the misfortune of Judah and failing to help (Obad 12).

The second part of v 12 indicates the greatness of Jerusalem’s suffering; it cannot be compared to any other people’s suffering. It is great and without comparison because it is brought upon Jerusalem by Yahweh’s **fierce anger**. Nevertheless, Jerusalem should seek comfort from Yahweh (v 11). God’s anger is mentioned eleven times in Lamentations. **The day of his fierce anger** seems to connect with the “day of Yahweh,” a common prediction of disaster in the Prophets.

The Day of Yahweh

The concept of the day of Yahweh apparently arose from the miracles of the past wars of conquest in which Yahweh delivered Israel from its enemies. Israel’s popular tradition expected Yahweh to intervene and save Israel from future enemy invasions. Amos took this expectation of judgment for foreign nations and applied it to the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 5:20). Israel apparently had its day of Yahweh when Samaria was destroyed in 722 B.C. The day of Yahweh was applied to Judah as a future event (Isa 22:5), and then as a past event (Lam 1:12; 2:22; Ezek 34:12). After the fall of Jerusalem the terminology was still employed for future events, often with cosmological significance (Joel 1:15—2:11).

■ **13 Mem.** Verse 13 describes the tragedy as actions that Yahweh sent or carried out to make Jerusalem a desolate place. **Fire sent from on high** is the usual way to describe lightning or volcanic eruption in the OT (Gen 19:24; Exod 9:23-24). The destruction of Jerusalem did not occur through either of these, but invaders often used fire to bring about complete destruction of a city. This was the case for Jerusalem, as for Hazor in the conquest of Joshua (Josh 11:11). Amos promised fire from Yahweh for all eight nations in his opening prophecy, which condemned not only foreign nations but also Judah and especially the northern kingdom of Israel. Although the literal fire that destroyed Jerusalem may have been set by the Babylonians, Yahweh is credited as the ultimate cause of the destruction.

Spreading of a **net** is another metaphor that the author uses to describe Yahweh's action on Jerusalem. This metaphor is also used by Ezekiel (12:13; 17:20; 19:8; 32:3) and Hosea (5:1; 7:12). In the Psalms, God rescues from the net (25:15; 31:4), but here Yahweh's action causes destruction, desolation, and fainting.

■ **14 Nun.** Verse 14 describes the sin of Jerusalem as **bound into a yoke** (*nīšqad ʿōl*). This phrase is found only here in the OT; some Hebrew manuscripts (and Septuagint) have *nīšqad ʿal*, that is, “watch is kept upon.” Either Yahweh bound the sins of Judah into a yoke that Judah must bear (see e.g., Lev 19:8) or Yahweh has been watching their sins and has placed them upon the **neck** of Judah. Both readings yield the same meaning. The weight of Judah's sin is too great and its **strength** has failed. Neither can it stand or arise against the enemy, which is bringing God's punishment. A yoke is elsewhere a metaphor for servitude (e.g., Jer 27:8).

■ **15 Samek.** Verse 15 portrays Jerusalem as a city being trampled by a foreign army at the summons of Yahweh. The word **rejected** is only used four times in the OT (Job 28:16, 19; Ps 119:118). God rejects the effectiveness of Jerusalem's defenses (**all the warriors in my midst**), and sends **against** the city an **army** (lit., *assembly*) to crush the young soldiers of Jerusalem. The **winepress** (*gat*) is literally the stone pit where harvested grapes were trampled with bare feet to squeeze the juice out. In this verse it is metaphorical for the judgment of God trampling the people of Judah until blood flowed like red grape juice (see also Joel 3:13). **The Virgin Daughter of Judah** is not a subset of Judah but a metaphor for Judah as a whole (see comment on 1:6).

■ **16 Ayin.** Verse 16 revisits the theme of no comforter (1:2, 9), and the expression of grief takes the form of weeping. The Hebrew behind **overflow with tears** (*yōrēdā mayim*) is unusual because *yārad* (“to go down”) is usually an intransitive verb (it does not take a direct object) but here it has the object “water” (lit., *my eye my eye goes down water*). The double occurrence of “my eye” adds emphasis, although it is missing from some manuscripts and may be

an addition. There is no one to comfort or restore the spirit of Jerusalem. Jerusalem stands in need of both emotional comfort and physical survival in the aftermath of the destruction of the city in 586 B.C. The lament **My children are destitute** shows the natural parental concern for children, as it is more difficult to see the children suffer than to suffer oneself. This highlights the depth of desperation when the city was under siege and was later taken over by the enemy. The victory of the enemy over Jerusalem is another reason for the intense grief expressed in this verse.

Grief by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1844)

*I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;
That only men incredulous of despair,
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness,
In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare
Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare
Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death—
Most like a monumental statue set
In everlasting watch and moveless woe
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.
Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:
If it could weep, it could arise and go.*

■ **17 Pe.** The portrait of Jerusalem (**Zion**) in v 17 is that of a woman with hands stretched out and calling for help and comfort. This stretching out of hands (*pērśšâ*) to seek comfort is necessary because of the stretching out of the enemy's hand in conquest (1:10, "laid hands") and the stretching out of a net (1:13, "spread a net"). Hands were also stretched out (raised) during prayer (Isa 1:15; Jer 4:31). Using different vocabulary (*nā'āh*) God elsewhere stretched out his hand in judgment (Isa 5:25) and stretched out his arm to save (Deut 4:34).

Yahweh was credited with the destruction of Jerusalem earlier in the poem (1:5, 14), but in v 17 he is said to have "commanded" (**decreed**, *šiwwā*) **for Jacob that his neighbors become his foes**. There is a sense in which this command comes because Judah has disobeyed the command God gave his people (this connection is explicit in the NIV translation of 1:18, but "command" is not in the Hebrew text of that verse). It is by Yahweh's decree that Jerusalem, the once holy place of Yahweh, has become an **unclean** place in the world (see v 8).

■ **18 Tsade.** The first part of v 18 is a declaration of Yahweh's righteousness and Judah's confession of sin. Judah has not been righteous, but **The LORD is**

righteous (*saddiq*), or in the right (see 2 Chr 12:6; Dan 9:14; Neh 9:33). He has done the right thing in the covenant relationship while Judah has not. Not only has Judah neglected its relationship with God, but its prophets and priests have shed “the blood of the righteous” (4:13).

Saddiq (Righteous)

The root word for **righteous** is used outside the Bible in the sense of a status or behavior that conforms to a standard. In the Bible, this standard may be the Law or some other standard related to a relationship. For example, Jacob was righteous when he dealt honestly with Laban over the division of the flock (Gen 30:33). Judah failed to be righteous when he did not allow Tamar to marry his son (Gen 38:26). Being in the right or doing the right thing applies also to the Law, which is set in a covenant relationship between God and Israel. God’s righteousness is seen in his faithfulness to the covenant (Ps 9:4-5) (NIDOTTE 3:744-69).

Verses 9 and 11 called on the Lord to see the affliction of Jerusalem, but here in v 18 it is the **peoples** who are called on to **listen** and **look**. This is a request to look on with pity, though Judah was more likely to receive the contempt of surrounding nations (see v 7). The Targum takes **I rebelled against his command** as a statement by King Josiah who was not commanded to fight Pharaoh Neco (at whose hand he met his death in 609 B.C.). Thus the Targum considers Josiah’s sin to have contributed to the fall of Jerusalem, and Lamentations to contain Jeremiah’s laments on this (2 Chr 35:25; Brady 2003, 39-40). The statement that **maidens have gone into exile** apparently contradicts the assertion of 1:4 that maidens are still in the city grieving (although the Septuagint has “dragged away” in v 4). Likewise, the **young men** sent into exile in this verse were already said to be “crushed” in v 15.

■ **19 Qof.** Verse 19 conveys the betrayal of Jerusalem by her allies. **I called to my allies but they betrayed me** is poetic justice for Judah’s betrayal of covenant with Yahweh. Neighboring countries could hardly have come to Jerusalem’s defense against the mighty Babylonian empire and all had treaties with Babylon that would have precluded any treaty with Judah. Judah also had such a treaty but attracted the wrath of Babylon by refusing to pay the tribute (which was one of the terms of the treaty). So Judah decries the betrayal of others even though it has betrayed both God and Babylon. The Hebrew word for **allies** is literally *lovers* (*lamē’ahābay*); this could mean other gods or inappropriate relationships with other nations. Yahweh should have been Judah’s “lover,” not other gods or nations (see 1:2).

The **priests** and **elders** should have been people of high standing in the community, and the last ones to starve in the crisis of siege. But things were so bad that even they could not find enough bread to eat. There is an apparent contradiction here with 1:4, which speaks of the priests groaning, not perish-

ing. This is the first notice that conditions were bad enough that they resulted in death (see v 11).

■ **20 Resh.** Yahweh is again called upon to see the distress of Judah in v 20 (see vv 9, 11). The word **distressed** is the same as the word used for “enemy” in 1:5, 7, 10, and 17 (*sar*). Judah’s distress is on account of her enemy, Babylon. The phrase **I am in torment within** is literally *my inwards are in tumult* (*mē‘ay hōmarmārū*). The word for tumult or **torment** (*hōmarmārū*) is used elsewhere for boiling, or waters foaming up. In Hebrew thinking, bodily organs including the heart represent the seat of emotion, although the heart is often considered the organ of thinking and willpower (the function of the brain was not understood). The words *inwards* and **heart** together stress the totality of the distress.

I have been most rebellious suggests another confession. The word **rebellious** (*mārā*) is similar to “bitter” (*mārar*), which seems to fit the context better (see the Septuagint). There is some ambiguity in the phrase **Outside, the sword bereaves; inside, there is only death**. Literally the words speak of the “street” (*mihûš*) and the “house” (*babbayit*). More accurately, the sword was outside the city gates, while inside the famine was claiming lives (Jer 14:18; Ezek 7:15). Metaphorically, there was physical danger (outside), while psychologically the strain of siege was claiming all courage and even the will to live (inside).

■ **21 Sin and Shin.** Verse 21 returns to the theme of the lack of comforters. The order of the Hebrew alphabet allows this poem to follow up the call to “see” in v 20, with the call to “hear” in v 21. This assumes an imperative force for “hear” along with the ancient Greek and Syriac versions. The Hebrew text has the indicative “they heard,” which also makes sense. This first poem has both cries to Yahweh to notice Judah’s distress, and statements about what the onlooking nations were doing (failing to help or comfort). And so the lament is repeated, **there is no one to comfort me**. Verse 21 continues **All my enemies have heard of my distress**. The word used for **distress** (*rā‘ān*) is also used for evil or wickedness. The surrounding nations would have heard of Judah’s distress but must also have known of their evil actions, specifically their rebellion against Babylon, and perhaps even the cry of Judah’s own prophets announcing Judah’s rebellion against Yahweh.

The last line of v 21 mentions **the day you have announced**, which must be the day of Yahweh that the prophets announced (see comment on 1:12). Verse 21 ends with the wish that the nations would become like Judah in the experience of Yahweh’s judgment. This divine justice will be the source of comfort to Judah, which at the present time exists without comfort from anyone. **So they may become like me** goes naturally with the following verse, which calls for judgment on the nations.

■ **22** **Taw.** The poem closes with a wish for the same fate to overtake the enemies of Judah. Prayer for God’s judgment of one’s enemies is frequently found in the lament psalms. In the prayer for vengeance in the lament psalms and in Lamentations, there is an implicit acknowledgment of God as the judge of all who practice evil. Jerusalem demands God’s impartial judgment on her enemies in the same way he has brought judgment on Jerusalem. Many of the prophets pronounced oracles against foreign nations—not out of revenge but to bring justice, not only for crimes against Israel but also for crimes against other nations (Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel). The poem couples this call for justice with Judah’s acknowledgment of guilt.

The lament closes with an expression of despair (**my groans are many and my heart is faint**) to motivate God to respond quickly to the crisis of Jerusalem. The depth of emotion expressed here has prompted interpreters to think that Lamentations was written soon after the disaster of 586 B.C. (see Introduction).

FROM THE TEXT

Suffering

Lamentations 1 introduces the sufferings of Jerusalem, which is the theme of the whole book. The city’s suffering is superlative (v 12), it is the cause for unending tears (v 2), it is without comfort (v 21), and it is the result of sin (v 22). This expression of pain is a healthy response and invites the reader/hearer to participate in the sufferings, but it is not the only biblical response. Isaiah 40—55 calls for comforters (40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12; 52:9), and the NT brings meaning to the sufferings of Christ and calls for contentment from his followers who also suffer (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 1:5).

Justice

Lamentations laments the suffering of innocent women and children, and yet attributes the suffering to sin (v 22). This explanation for evil breaks down if punishment is to be commensurate with the crime (Bergant 2003, 72). Jerusalem’s fall resulted from Zedekiah’s rebellion against the Babylonian overlords. This decision had an impact on all in his kingdom, soldier and bystander, innocent and guilty. Sometimes it is appropriate to attribute suffering to sin (whether one’s own or someone else’s), and sometimes it is not. The NT calls us to alleviate the sufferings of others through practical means and to look ahead to a judgment day when justice will be done.

Complaining to God

Complaining to God seems as unnatural for a Christian as it seems natural for the OT believer. Lament psalms begin with complaint to God and are

the largest category in the book of Psalms. Complaints in laments are meaningful expressions of suffering. Complaining to God is a profound act of faith and represents an expectation that God will act in the cause of justice. It is a step toward healing and restoration.

The various repeated and somewhat disjointed expressions of hurt and suffering in this chapter echo the indescribable and devastating human tragedies that we witness in the world today. We, too, hear in our world cries and complaints of those who suffer—the lonely and the abandoned, those who are hurt and traumatized by the tragic effects of poverty, violence, and war. The forsaken Jerusalem invites the church to see, hear, and enter into the contemporary world of suffering and thereby become a place where the brokenhearted and forsaken find healing and comfort.