“How Deserted Lies the City”:
Politics and the Trauma of Homelessness
in the Hebrew Bible

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For a full millennium in Europe, with frightening regularity, Jews of the
diaspora were subject to all manner of political restrictions on their ability to
live, work, and worship in their adopted countries. This domestic insecurity
would be punctuated with frightening regularity, with entire Jewish popu-
lations being expelled from this place or that, leaving behind all but what
they could carry and sometimes not even that. They would have to start
again in a new place, with no guarantee that the same fate would not befall
their children or their children’s children. The rise of political tolerance of
non-Christian religions in the Modern Age was supposed to have finally put
an end to this horrific pattern, but eighty some years ago in Germany, and
eventually through most of Europe, Jews watched helplessly as a new politi-
cal regime deprived them of their rights as citizens, then their homes, and
ultimately their lives.

The Holocaust ostensibly represents an incontrovertible beacon that
should forever protect Jews and every other vulnerable population from
threats of systemic oppression, loss of rights, and even genocide. Yet on a
global scale human communities today seem less safe from the trauma of
dislocation stemming from a nation’s politics than at any time since World
War II. Not only are antisemitic attacks on the rise in Europe, the United
States, and the Middle East, but around the world the overall displacement of
persons has reached epidemic proportions, with 65.6 million people, or 1 in
every 110 people in the world, “forced from their homes by violence, war and
persecution”—a record high.¹ Whether people are forced to leave their home,
leave as an act of desperation, or feel as if their home has left them, a state of
homelessness can be the result of larger political forces out of their control.
Homelessness of any sort is a truly traumatic experience, but because it is a
phenomenon that arises at the nexus of power, community, and identity, it
is an enlightening lens through which to view certain aspects of the Jewish
experience, in particular those of the Hebrew Bible that echo the impact of
the Babylonian exile.
TRAUMA AND HOMELESSNESS

When we speak of trauma, we can be speaking of a wound to the body, lingering psychological distress, a disruptive upheaval of social norms and functioning, or some combination of these together. How is it that one concept can apply equally well in three distinctly different contexts—or, better, be the concept that allows the damage in one realm to be related to and understood in terms of the others? How might we conceive of trauma so that the qualities that tie body, mind, and community together are brought to the fore? Sociologist Kai Erikson’s trenchant examination of the interrelationship among trauma, disaster, and community in *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* provides this description: “Trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body—or, more frequently now, to the structures of the mind—that results in injury or some other disturbance. Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, possesses you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape, and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty.”2 The most immediately striking thing about this description is how spatial its metaphors are, as though trauma takes place in an actual place, even if any specific injury might refer to a body, a brain, or a society. Even though Erikson rightly notes that the original use of the term in the modern context was biological, more typically now we understand the injury to be to the way a person (or a group of people) experience the world—the world as a physical place where one lives but cannot do so safely any longer.

Trauma is something “alien,” Erikson says; it “breaks in on you,” it smashes your barriers, invades you, possesses you, and dominates your “interior landscape,” where it threatens to “leave you empty.”3 Elsewhere, he says, a “true home . . . is an extension of the individuals who live in it, a part of themselves. . . . People need location almost as much as they need shelter, for sense of place is one of the ways they connect to the larger human community. . . . That is the geography of self.” Clearly, Erikson sees trauma as akin to an attack on one’s home, one severe enough to leave you homeless. When “that combined sense of dwelling and location . . . is missing, one is deprived of a measure of personhood. That, too, is the geography of self.”4

Bessel van der Kolk, a physician and trauma researcher, concurs from the medical and psychological points of view as well: Trauma is at the same time a loss of one’s connection to one’s body and to oneself.5 Trauma makes you an
alien in your own home, not just socially but also in body and mind. Of course, our bodies are our homes. They are our first home—or second, if we count our mothers’ bodies. Every description of the meaning of home can be applied to the meaning of our bodies. And whatever the source or type of injury, at some level trauma is always stored in the body, and therefore one needs a body to work out trauma.6 At the same time, moving outward rather than inward, “home” also signifies the entire world around us and all that we come to know and believe about it as it relates to our existence. We can call this our Weltanschauung [worldview], but for the purposes of this essay the concept is best conveyed by the “assumptive world” as introduced by Colin Murray Parkes and incorporated into a theory of trauma by Ronnie Janoff-Bulmann.7

Jeffrey Kaplan begins his collection exploring trauma through this lens: “The assumptive world concept refers to the assumptions or beliefs that ground, secure, or orient people, that give a sense of meaning, reality, or purpose to life.”8 In a later chapter, he explicitly ties the idea of the assumptive world to an underlying sense of safety, specifically the safety of self: “The ground on which we live and stake our existence is presumed. . . . When I lose my assumptive world, my self, which is normally presumed to be, is annihilated. . . . To the extent the self ceases to be safe, it ceases to be.”9 Kaplan even extends the implications of the assumptive world—and threats to it—to the metaphysical and spiritual: “The assumptive world provides cover for the soul. Traumatic loss is violation of the soul’s cover. . . . Traumatic violation is unholy. . . . The horrors of defilement, sacrificial self-loathing, or traumatic exposure to violence obliterate sacred cover.”10 Where the biblical texts lay bare the trauma of the loss not just of a home but also of a sacred home, Kaplan’s description of the “traumatic violation” as “unholy” or the “obliteration” of “sacred cover” seems particularly apt.

Notably, Kaplan’s explication of the assumptive world is nearly as spatial and locative in its metaphors as Erikson’s, speaking of it as “the ground on which we live” and a “cover for the soul,” the loss of which results in “traumatic exposure to violence.” To lose one’s “cover for the soul” is to be exposed, defenseless, vulnerable to violence, and shamed, a set of experiences also associated with homelessness—and with exile.11 Erikson states that “the sense of being despised and rejected and set apart as loathsome—‘contaminated’ might even be the right word—is a palpable part of the world of the homeless.”12 So too can the same be said of the world of the exiles as expressed in the literature of the Hebrew Bible, and thus it offers a lens through which to view this literature and perhaps the Bible as a whole.
One of the most immediate symptoms of a traumatic wound is for it to be so overwhelming as to resist articulation into the basic narrative of one’s life experience. In fact, when this happens, some aspects of the trauma defy language and cannot be remembered in conventional ways. Trauma can thus be assimilated only by placing it in symbolic sequence, like a story, poem, liturgical prayer, or some other kind of structured language. Making pictures, erecting spaces, and creating other kinds of symbolic constructions can work as well. Literary critic Ronald Granofsky describes narratives he calls “trauma novels” as a “resymbolizing” of the trauma—that is, they reinscribe meaning into the events that caused the trauma.\(^{13}\) It is one contention of this essay that the Hebrew Scriptures represent such resymbolizing narratives inasmuch as their writing, redacting, compilation, and preservation are, in degrees large and small, the product of forces resulting from the Babylonian conquest and exile. The resymbolizing presented by the particular texts most directly confronting the traumas wrought by the Babylonians appears to represent effective efforts to contend with the destructive impact of a powerful political entity upon a sacred homeland.

**HOMELESSNESS, TRAUMA, AND THE BABYLONIAN EXILE**

Currently, a strong body of scholarship has cast not only specific books but also the entirety of the TaNaKh itself in light of the demands of the Jewish people in the wake of the exile—before, during, and after.\(^{14}\) Whether it is the emergence of the Deuteronomistic history and Mosaic narrative as the unifying theodicy that explains how history went so wrong, the preservation of the Nevi’im (Prophets) as the retroactive moral conscience of wounded people, or any other number of fragments of poems, prayers, laments, oracles, short stories, philosophical treatises, or theological assertions, in this picture of the Hebrew Scriptures the exile is the “grand unifying theory” that makes it more than the sum of its parts, the historical sun whose gravity binds together the diverse ideological systems expressed in the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible. That is to say, at its core, the Hebrew Bible is an extended response to the trauma of the exile; even more specifically, in form, function, and content, the echoes of the loss of Zion as the “master symbol” of Jewish life, qua temple and homeland, reverberate throughout its pages. The destruction of Jerusalem represents the loss of the covenantal symbols in the Jewish “assumptive world”: the Promised Land, the Davidic Kingship, and the temple.

To be sure, the temple, as “Zion,” is a metonym that encompasses all of those symbols and more. It is the Jewish people and their home; even more,
it is Beit HaMikdash, the Holy House, the earthly residence of the presence of the Lord (1 Kgs 6:11–13). The Judeans so trusted in the sanctity of “the Lord’s house” that they believed that its inviolability kept them and the city safe from attack, a position that the prophet Jeremiah mocks by mimicking people reflexively babbling about “The Temple of the Lord! The Temple of the Lord! The Temple of the Lord!” in response to prophetic warnings (Jer 7:4).

As such, telling its tragic tale is both the expression of and the solution to experienced trauma. The dispiriting conditions of homelessness are expressed throughout the narratives of the Bible. Crucially, in relating the events and moral failures that lead up to exile, the Hebrew Bible simultaneously lays the groundwork to make itself the Jews’ new home in exile—as the “home” of the Law. Even after many of the major issues that the exile raises are resolved in the Second Temple period, this paradigm is reproduced in later traumatic challenges to home, as under the Hellenists in the books of Daniel and Maccabees, or under the Romans, as in the apocalypses of 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch—or Christianity. Prior to the fall of the Second Temple (and thus essentially a second exile), the issue is not physical displacement rather but social and even spiritual displacement. That is, home has left its inhabitants. They are aliens in their own country, strangers in their own strange land.

THE POLITICS OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE TORAH

It is worth lingering a moment on the implications of this last point, as it drives home an often overlooked reality of the myriad ways the exile impacted and even brought into being Judaism as we know it today. Arguably, Judaism was birthed in the trauma of the exile, which is to say, it was born homeless. Moreover, that trauma was inflicted within the very specific political arena of several centuries of ancient Near Eastern imperial history. Then as now, people do not become homeless in a vacuum, and the pain does not become “trauma” outside of a context of social relationships, power dynamics, and authoritative policies of some sort. Homelessness and its effects come into being by choices that are made and not made, by people both in and out of power. As Erikson puts it, “Homelessness is the cost we are willing for one portion of the population to pay in the hopes of benefitting another. It is a matter of policy.”

Where there is policy, there is politics; where there is politics, there is power; and where there is power, there is the potential for injury and suffering. Homelessness, in all the senses of which this essay will address, is but one manifestation of this relationship between politics and trauma, and on the
world stage of imperial designs and military campaigns, it is so obvious and ubiquitous as to be virtually overlooked. This essay contends, though, that significant parts of the theological record we call the Hebrew Bible captures the specific deep-seated pain associated with homelessness, and thus it becomes a means by which to understand these texts better.

This essay assumes Harold Lasswell’s broad but intuitive and inclusive observation that politics is “who gets what, when, how.” This definition, as sparse as it is, has the benefit of working on either side of power divides. That is, it recognizes that politics is also about who does not get “what” they want (because someone else got it), who never gets it (thus “when” never comes), and the variety of forms “how” must take on—because “how” is about strategies of power. Many strategies of power may leave traumatic consequences in their wake, both intentionally and unintentionally. However, in many ways, effective responses to trauma involve creating new strategies for reconceiving that power and its effects, even if retroactively.

This essay will use such a lens to examine places where the Hebrew Scriptures confront the traumatic legacy of the politics that brought it into being, both to honor the wound and express the pain still being felt but also to create a space where the healing process will result in heartier, more resilient people. Therefore, this essay will assume that the Scriptures examined are not morbid or melancholic relics of a traumatic past but instead are a vibrant, living record of the successful process of transforming trauma into a new, if still emerging, whole. Irene Smith Landsman notes that psychological research indicates a “paradox of good outcomes” resulting from trauma; despite all the damage that it does, trauma often also makes people more resilient, allows them to find life more meaningful, and enables them to value important relationships more. The Hebrew Bible and its legacy may just be the ultimate example of this paradox of trauma.

Confronting the Hebrew Scriptures again with a perspective informed by exile, politics, homelessness and their resultant and often intergenerational traumas, the way these themes are bred in the bones of the Bible, as it were, is unmistakable. From a biblical point of view, the very first story, the expulsion from Eden, is nothing if not the first narrative of human homelessness and the traumas that ensue. And lest the politics that spur the inciting incident be forgotten, one must recall not only the authoritative rule structure imposed on Adam and Eve concerning the Tree of Knowledge but also God’s unnerving confession that “the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of
life and eat, and live forever!’ So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken” (Gen 2:22–23). In light of Lasswell’s definition, the implicit politics of paradise are palpable: There is a clear “what” that is restricted, and violation of that policy is enforced powerfully. As it happens, adherence to the divine directive not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was a precondition for calling Eden “home”; thus, with the expulsion, everywhere on Earth outside of the garden now represents homelessness—an existential condition that some Jews (and Christians) would say persists until the Messianic age and the coming of God’s Kingdom on Earth.

The major narrative of Genesis that follows the Fall story, the episode of Noah and the Flood, in essence is also a story of losing one’s home by dint of power brought to bear on those who got what they wanted, how they wanted, and when they wanted in illegitimate ways. In this case, “home” was the earth itself—the very place that became home after the expulsion from Eden—and the enforcement of moral law resulted in the near-complete annihilation of all living creatures.

The Jewish story per se begins just a few chapters later with Abraham, né Abram, whose name change is part and parcel of the covenant that God grants him, which brings both the concept of the Chosen People and the Promised Land into being. From the very start, then, the quintessential Jewish covenant involves the promise of a homeland—but also from the very start, the foreknowledge that possession of that homeland would be deferred. Abraham is portrayed as rootless if not exactly homeless, moving from Ur to Harrah to Canaan to Egypt and back to Canaan. Seeking to bury his wife Sarah in Canaan, he states to the Hittites, “I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you” (Gen 23:4).

From Abraham down his line, from one generation to the next, readers encounter one deception or dirty trick after another, culminating in the assault and sale into bondage in Egypt of Abraham’s great-grandson, Joseph, by his own brothers (Gen 37). A dream prophesied the brothers’ subjugation to Joseph, and thus his siblings acted to avoid powerlessness and disenfranchisement. There is also an element of family politics in the fact that the brothers knew that their father, Jacob, loved Joseph more. One can only imagine how traumatic an experience this betrayal must have been for Joseph, especially when he is later thrown in prison on false charges. Yet he is spared the deleterious effects of his situation because of God’s interventions, ones that eventually allow him to gain great political power in his new country. So when a famine
drives the brothers themselves into Egypt, recapitulating Abraham’s earlier dislocation, the prophecy is fulfilled—though the brothers too are spared the worst consequences of their homelessness because of Joseph’s political status.

Of course, all of this narrative place-setting leads inevitably to the story of the return back to Canaan to finally fulfill the Abrahamic promise and make a homeland for his descendants. Unsurprisingly by now, the Moses narrative, too, is replete with dislocations, expulsions, and other jarring disruptions of “home” for Moses, starting with his journey from a Hebrew home in slavery to a home in the center of Egyptian political power. Subsequently, he became a fugitive after killing an overseer in defense of a (fellow) Hebrew and recognizing that he could never return to the home he knew. Then he memorialized his alien status in Midian by giving his son the name “Gershom,” a reference to his being a “stranger in a foreign land” (Exod 2:22). Later he wandered with the Israelites for forty years before reaching the Promised Land, where God, by an arguably cruel and tragic command, forbade him from entering before his death. The entire Mosaic storyline can be seen as an extended meditation on a situation of chronic homelessness brought about by traumatizing politics, first for Bene Israel, after the death of Joseph gave way to a series of bad conditions and worse pharaohs, and second, experienced and borne by Moses himself.

Apart from the thematic resonance of the central myths of the Jewish origin stories, the Hebrew Scriptures preserve texts understood by most readers, religious and scholarly alike, to be actual responses to the devastation of the exile. Chief among these, depicting the sentiments of those either left behind in the devastated land of Judah or carted off to Babylon as human booty and slaves, are the books of Lamentations and Ezekiel as well as Psalm 137, all of which certainly exhibit the immediate impact of imperial politics and the trauma of homelessness.

PSALM 137

One of the most famous verses of all the Psalms is the opening of 137, a crie de coeur over the loss of Jerusalem as a geographic place, as a home, framed specifically by emphasizing dislocation in another place. Psalm 137 is remarkably real-worldly in its clear-eyed acknowledgment of the traumatic events that brought the Judeans to this foreign land, beginning with the almost documentary-like description of the humiliation heaped on them by their captors, which added insult to injury. As brutal and painful as the scenario depicted in Psalm 137 is, it seems to grapple with the harsh realities endured
by the exiles as exactly that, harsh realities. To begin, literally, “by the rivers of Babylon” is a very real-world statement of fact, which sets the tone for the poem as a whole:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.
There on the poplars we hung up our lyres,
for our captors asked us there for songs,
our tormentors, for amusement, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither;
Let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in my memory even at my happiest hour.
Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall;
how they cried, “Strip her, strip her to her very foundations!”
Fair Babylon, you predator,
A blessing on him who repays you in kind what you have inflicted on us;
A blessing on him who seizes your babies and dashes them against the rocks.

A critical portion of this short lament is devoted to the concern that the exiles will forget their home, Jerusalem. There are repeated calls to keep Jerusalem in memory, creating social conditions that should prevent its memory either from being repressed, thus giving into the worst effects of the injury, or from legitimately being forgotten, as though its loss were inconsequential. Intriguingly, in verse 6 the speaker calls on himself—and presumably the other exiles—to remember the city “even at my happiest hour,” suggesting a turn of fortunes that will require preserving the memory of the city’s tragic end and not just their home in its glory days. From the perspective of a trauma reading, this entire poem could be understood as instructions to the exiled population on how to mitigate the damage done by the violent and humiliating loss of its homeland by keeping real-world events from becoming overwhelming, despite how painful they are. That is, the psalm models how not to lose the narrative of one’s own history, and what resymbolization there is appears as a hope that the conquerors will someday experience the same pain they have inflicted.

Notably, the two images that are not specifically about the loss of one place while sitting helpless, vulnerable, and exposed in another are about injuries inflicted on bodies. First, the consequence of forgetting Jerusalem will be a hand’s loss of ability. The construction of verse 5 is strange in Hebrew and
in English. Historically, most translations have understood the verse to read something like “may my hand forget”—variously, forget “its skill” or “its cunning.” The fact that the text is not clear what the hand is forgetting is part of the problem. “How can hands forget?” asks Bob Becking. Thus, some biblical scholars, including those behind the Jewish Publication Society’s translation above, emend škh [to forget] to tšhk [to wither], as in “may my right hand wither.” In the context of the effect of trauma on the body, either reading is intriguing. While describing a body part as “forgetting” may be unusual, the inability to perform some well-learned task in the wake of trauma does fit the psychosomatic symptomology as traumatic amnesia; ordinary actions or well-rehearsed public performances may be experienced as “blocked” or “forgotten,” as though the body has lost its muscle memory.

In the context of Psalm 137, the phrase would likely refer to the inability to perform music, with one’s hands literally embodying the inability to remember Jerusalem. The traumatic suppression of the memory of home is expressed physically in the loss of skill in the hands that once used to play the music from home. By the same token, the other reading, “wither” for “forget,” provides a bodily reaction in parallel with the inability to speak of the next verse (or perhaps sing, given the immediate textual context), suggesting an even more crippling psychosomatic expression of the trauma. Just as the Judean body politic has been withered and crippled and will be more so if it forgets its home and all it once stood for, so too may their hands be palsied, unable to work, let alone rebuild, if that connection to Jerusalem is permanently severed.

The other image is of “dashing” the infants of “Fair Babylon” (literally, “Daughter of Babylon”) against rocks, “in kind what you have inflicted on us.” This horrific picture captures a real-world aspect of the brutality of war and the way that vulnerable women, children, and families are targeted by invading armies in efforts to demoralize the resisting population into submission. It also suggests that apart from watching their city fall to ruin, this injury is the one that most lingers in the memories—and the bodies—of the exiles, such that it will be the first act (re)visited upon Babylon when the time comes. In reversing the roles of the conquest’s victims and perpetrators, Psalm 137 appears to be re-symbolizing the exile within the sacred record of the Judeans.

Of the two excurses into body imagery, one insightfully posits the (psychosomatic) damage if the memory is forgotten, and the other posits a relatable revenge fantasy against those responsible for their suffering. Their captors’ mocking calls for joyous songs of Jerusalem suggest ongoing humiliation; the
power and politics leading up to this particular scene are strongly implied. Psalm 137 therefore speaks forthrightly to the immediate pain and disorientation of the exiles and presents images of some of the horrors of the war that can be resolved only in the future when the political stakes have reversed. There is still hope here, even as these exiles deal with their situation as exactly what it is, a heartbreaking but temporary blow—schadenfreude in Babylon reaping what it has sown is on the horizon somewhere.

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

An even more heart-wrenching case than Psalm 137, if such a thing is possible, is found in perhaps the quintessential picture of the trauma of exile, the book of Ezekiel. In earlier work, the present author has addressed trauma in Ezekiel as reflecting the condition once known as melancholia, understood by Sigmund Freud to be a state of being overwhelmed by loss and therefore unable to let go of the reality that was now gone. More recently, Ruth Poser sets forth perhaps the hallmark reading in her contribution to *The Bible through the Lens of Trauma*. Therefore, this essay will limit itself to highlighting a few lines of thought relevant to the current discussion.

Just as in Psalm 137, the book of Ezekiel immediately frames its key figure’s present alienation from place as a result of exile. But rather than the real-world reportage that marks the psalm, Ezekiel and the book’s audience are swept into the most incredible, astounding, surreal visionary experience imaginable. This is the return of God after five years with no contact with his people in exile. Yet God appears to Ezekiel not to deliver good news but instead to affix blame on the exiles for their own predicament, due to the religious corruption that it presents as being deeply rooted even into the priesthood and temple practice. Indeed, in the course of the first half of the book, the entire lauded history of Israel and Judah is transformed into a horror show of betrayal, degeneration, and faithlessness.

From the perspective of trauma literature, two noteworthy therapeutic moves seem to be happening simultaneously. First, this tragedy has now become part and parcel of a story that has existed from Israel’s origins, doing the narrative work required to comprehend the incomprehensible. Second, psychological research shows that trauma victims who express a certain degree of self-blame (even when definitively not at all responsible for their injuries) exhibit better overall coping mechanisms in the long run. Demonstrating an internal locus of control, even when it means accepting responsibility for things
that are objectively not one’s fault, seems to be a more adaptive healing strategy than blaming others, even if warranted. Notably, the blame in the book of Ezekiel is squarely fixed not on the Babylonians or on God but instead on the exiles themselves, including the prophet, and the entire sad lineage that preceded them.

Like Psalm 137, the book of Ezekiel expresses the impact of exile in two vivid ways through bodies. Ezekiel turns his own actual body into a stage for performing a series of bizarre and often denigrating sign acts, starting with rendering the prophet mute—literally exhibiting the “cleaving of the tongue to the roof of the mouth” defended against in Psalm 137—except when he speaks as the prophet of the Lord (Ezek 3:26). These jarring rituals mark a moment when the text demonstrates collective, psychological, and bodily trauma simultaneously. And yet, many of the actions allude specifically to the political situation that gave rise to the trauma in the first place—chapter 4 is a full-on recapitulation of the siege of Jerusalem, wherein Ezekiel, as the Babylonian army, first attacks a block of clay and then bears the weight of sin for Israel and Judah collectively for 430 days.

Later the symbolic embodiment of trauma takes an entirely different form in the graphic depictions of Jerusalem as a faithless, promiscuous wife. But as Poser indicates, “the text exonerates Jerusalem to some extent: the biography of the city-as-woman in Ezekiel 16 portrays her as of low birth and the daughter of wicked parents who left their infant daughter to die. . . . Such a depiction . . . absolves her of responsibility: if she is incapable of remaining faithful, it is because of the maltreatment she suffered earlier.” Be that as it may, the choice to portray the city as unfaithful is at the same time an only slightly veiled critique of a national policy of political and military alliances that also facilitated polytheistic intrusions into the monarchal and priestly operations of Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple.

The ultimate connection among wives, Jerusalem, and detrimental imperial relations is solidified when the death of Ezekiel’s wife in chapter 24 foreshadows the fall of the actual temple to Babylonian forces. These depictions of the destruction of Jerusalem in the book of Ezekiel all find it necessary to capture, one way or another, three key aspects of the situation: the physical destruction of the city and the land; the painful experience that the loss inflicted on the community, usually represented by forms of exposure, humiliation, and bodily abuse; and, though not referenced as directly, a clear allusion to the political facts of exile. Any torments they suffer are the product of the homelessness brought about by the successful political strategies of the
Babylonians and just as much by the unsuccessful political strategies of the Judean leadership.

As I have argued elsewhere, the concerns of the book of Ezekiel begin to pivot after the physical temple finally falls in chapter 33, and from there on the concern with restoration becomes more and more prominent.\(^30\) The remaining chapters contain the evocative New Heart passage (36), the depiction of national resurrection in the form of dry bones that regain bodies (37), the bloody revenge fantasy against Magog (38–39), and ultimately the detailed appearance of the New Jerusalem (40–48). This final vision imagines, in very concrete terms, the return of the Jewish home and all of its concomitant political and religious facets, right down to the very name of the place: \textit{Yahweh Šammah} [Yahweh Is There].

In the first two of these passages, the trauma of exile is worked out within the framework of bodily healing. In the Magog apocalypse, as in Psalm 137, what had been inflicted on Judean bodies is now wrought against the wicked perpetrators, thereby creating the conditions for Judah to be restored. Poser argues convincingly that the entire Gog-Magog narrative is a therapeutic recapitulation of exilic history.\(^31\) Both the political situation and the damage inflicted have been reversed. Having restored the body politic with new bodies, recovered a “new self” with a new heart, and then reclaimed the homeland in a new telling of the Babylonian conquest, the space has been prepared—narratively, first, but then emotionally, spiritually, and politically—to go home. Suffice it to say, to promise that the future consecrated house of God and land of the Jewish people will restore the entire original religio-political apparatus of the Israelites, while at the same time becoming ascendant over the other nations of Earth, directly resolves the trauma brought about by imperial politics and the homelessness they cause by reversing both in an idealized and wholly restorative way.\(^32\)

\textbf{THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS}

But what about that actual physical place, that home that was lost, that city that lay in ruins? Do the emotional and political visions of the exiles mesh with the realities of the land they imagine being restored to? The book of 2 Chronicles paints the picture of a Judah devoid of Jews, who were carried into exile to be subject to redeeming punishment for seventy years. The book of Ezra presents the place to which the exiles return as rife with foreigners and mixed marriages, essentially perpetuating the original unfaithfulness believed to have caused the exile in the first place.\(^33\) Even as the depiction in Ezra
contradicts the statement in 2 Chronicles on the face of it, one might argue that it is a distinction without a difference; if those who remained in the land did not change their ways in light of the devastation all around them, then Judah was empty of redeemable Jews, at least until the exiles returned and Ezra reinstated (or, more likely, instated broadly for the first time) a political code of conduct reflecting Mosaic Law and monotheism.\textsuperscript{34}

The viewpoint of Judah being an “empty land” over centuries became standard for the Jewish community and, later, biblical scholars. But this stance has been fairly conclusively challenged over the last few decades, giving way to an understanding that this biblical construction reflects a political strategy of the returning exiles themselves, one infused with the Deuteronomist narrative that allows the Hebrew Scriptures to cohere as a response to exile.\textsuperscript{35} By the same token, it allowed the exilic community to make meaningful sense of the devastating losses they suffered. The stance thereby emerges from the traumatic events in a position to build a new world from them, with the Bible as their chief instrument.

To be sure, one book, the book of Lamentations, resists either picture of the Judean landscape after 587 BCE. An eloquent and heartbreaking poem, in Hebrew it is titled ‘Êykhôh, named for its first word, traditionally rendered in English as the question “How?” but carrying the meaning of the interjection of despair “Alas!” (or, as frequently exclaimed in Yiddish, “Oy!”). But as the English name suggests, it captures the pain of the loss of Jerusalem every bit as acutely as Psalm 137 but does it from the point of view of people who have lost their home without leaving it.\textsuperscript{36} Even without being removed from the land, the eradication of the other Zionistic aspects of day-to-day life, not to mention the long-term reduction to subsistence living among the ruins in the aftermath of war, would have transformed the sacred space of the Promised Land into an alien presence in its own right—a promise withdrawn. Like Adam and Eve, they were cast out of paradise; like Noah, they were unmoored after an apocalypse; like Moses, they were out of place in a strange land. But it was their home that left them. Would the trauma of homelessness present itself in the literature in the same way as it did among the exiles? Would the politics of the situation linger in the background or emerge more profoundly?

Like the other literature of the displaced examined above, Lamentations establishes place and then contrasts it with assumed normal conditions: “Alas! Lonely sits the city once great with people! She that was great among the states is become like a widow; the princess among the states is become a thrall”
“How Deserted Lies the City”

(Lam 1:1). Throughout, the injurious effects are presented as the direct result of the successful imperial campaign: “My children are forlorn, for the foe has prevailed” (Lam 1:16). Yet chapter 2 is almost entirely a catalog of the ways in which the homeland of the Jews was rendered uninhabitable, not by the Babylonians, but by God. In fact, verses 4 and 5 explicitly call or compare God to an enemy, just after alluding to how God allowed the approach of the invading forces. “The Lord has acted like a foe, he has laid waste Israel, laid waste all her citadels, destroyed her strongholds. He has increased within Fair Judah mourning and moaning” (Lam 2:5).

As in the book of Ezekiel, the city becomes personified as a traumatized woman, though in this case, first as a widow and then, through most of the rest of the poem, as “Daughter” (literally bat; rendered as “fair” in this translation) Zion. “Fair Princess Daughter” Zion is vilified along the same lines as the faithless wife in Ezekiel, blaming her sins for her lowly state. God acts like an abuser and an abandoner, intentionally humiliating his “daughter” in public for all the world to see (Lam 1:8–9, 13–17).

Chapter 2 moves back and forth from clear-eyed assessment of the damage to the homeland to the emotional and bodily effects that damage has had on the people there and on “Daughter Jerusalem” herself, culminating in the telling but despairing “Your ruin is as vast as the sea: Who can heal you?” (Lam 2:13b). The way that trauma of the loss of the Jewish homeland becomes embodied by Jerusalem here underscores that the witnessing of the destruction of the city and the subsequent deathly tribulations of the populace are every bit as painful as those of their exilic counterparts—and perhaps even more so; maybe the deep, ruinous wound cannot be healed.

In fact, the juxtaposition of Daughter Zion’s violation both with the people’s suffering, especially that of mothers and children, and with the physical destruction of the city draws the reader to a stark conclusion: The city of Zion itself is just as homeless and traumatized as the people who once inhabited it. This depiction of Daughter Zion literally expresses the people’s trauma in her body, which signifies both the physical place and the collective social body. At the same time, as the symbol of the complete loss of the assumptive word that the devastation of the communal Yahwistic institutions and symbols represents, her character conveys the corresponding dimensions of trauma in mind and spirit.

Chapters 4 and 5 thoroughly depict the before and after of life in Judah following the fall of Jerusalem. The sentiment of homelessness within one’s own homeland is stated most starkly in chapter 5: “Our heritage has passed
to aliens, our homes to strangers” (Lam 5:2). Graphic depictions of wartime strife abound, especially in the many allusions to hunger and the desperation with which people search for food, including the humiliating bargains they are forced to strike with their oppressors simply to survive: “We must pay to drink our own water, obtain our own kindling at a price. . . . We hold out a hand to Egypt; to Assyria, for our fill of bread. . . . We get our bread at the peril of our lives, because of the sword of the wilderness” (Lam 5:4, 6, 9). This last line in particular ties the threat of hunger to the military threat that continues because of the political realities of imperial domination. But nothing comes close to conjuring the horrors of their new life like the references to mothers cooking their children to eat them, perversely reversing the natural order wherein mothers feed their children to give them life (Lam 2:20, 4:10).41 This single image manages to combine and exceed the dreadful memories of hunger and murdered children inscribed in Psalm 137.

But unlike that psalm or the second half of Ezekiel, Lamentations does not relieve the symptoms of the trauma it depicts, with the exception of a brief turn toward the future and the hope for restoration and revenge in chapter 3 (vv. 55–66). Even the final verses of the book are forlorn and pleading rather than hopeful: “Why have You forgotten us utterly, forsaken us for all time? Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old! For truly, You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us” (Lam 5:20–22).

The difference in these outlooks may very well lie in the political perspectives in which they are couched. In exile, under the yoke of a foreign power in a foreign land, the only immediate hope would have been to throw off that empire, return to Judah, and restore the land, redeeming the Jewish people in the process. But while Psalm 137 places the blame firmly on the conquering empire and Ezekiel places it on the Jewish people and the exiles, Lamentations attributes the powerful force that has devastated the lives of the Jews and rendered them homeless to God himself. Now that the Babylonians have left, the Judeans’ only available response is to address their pain to God in the most direct way possible—and yet, God remains silent and unmoved.42 Hence, the people structure their pain as a lament and offer it as a vehicle to elicit God’s response. The community hopes for governance from God because they formulated their grief in a prayer, which they believed made it undeniably matter to him.43 Any response to the trauma by God would necessarily address the politics that had most immediately, in a this-worldly sense, inflicted the injuries and suffering on the people.
CONCLUSION: COMING HOME
IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

With the compilation of the Torah in exile and subsequently the TaNaKh in diaspora, “home” as master symbol existed more in the Bible than it did on Earth. The promise of a return to the Promised Land grew out of the idea of place that thrived in the text. But the need for a return—and its constant deferral into the future—directly results from the political realities of the times. The remarkable thing is that despite a biblical narrative, a name, a mythos, and a historical identity all rooted in the traumatic loss of their homeland, the Jewish people as a whole do not present themselves as essentially traumatized. In fact, their great gifts to the world—in religion and spirituality, the social and physical sciences, medicine, education, government, literature and the other arts—show them to be in the business of tikkun olam [mending the world], a phrase that itself comes from the Kabbalistic story of a trauma in the very fabric of the cosmos.

There can be no doubt that this legacy originates in the Hebrew Bible. Though a product of an intensely traumatic period for the Jews, it honestly records but also transforms that trauma into the platform for a new community, offering a new home and a new politics that resist the string of losses, wounds, and attacks on Jewish selves that history has had in store for them.

NOTES


3. Erikson, A New Species, 228.

4. Ibid., 159.


6. Ibid., 89–95.


10. Ibid., 210–11.

11. One homeless person whose struggles Erikson documents says, “To me, one of the basic fundamentals of life is having a roof over your head. . . . So there’s panic and fear, a sense of disbelief. It just doesn’t seem possible, yet there you are dealing with it. A nightmare!” (A New Species, 174).


19. Perhaps Noah’s drunken state described in Genesis 9:21 can be interpreted as trying to manage the long-term trauma that results from witnessing and surviving a forty-day apocalypse. The story of the Tower of Babel may also presage some of the Flood story’s themes of global homelessness as a result of humans’ illegitimate use of power to get what they want.

20. According to some traditions, the breaking of the glass at a Jewish wedding ceremony also intentionally incorporates, in the midst of great joy, the recollection of the destruction of Jerusalem (Berlin and Brettler, The Jewish Study Bible, 1424).

22. Ibid.


26. Ibid., 33; Daschke, *City of Ruins*, 84–85, 98–99.

27. Janoff-Bulman posits two different kinds of self-blame, characterological and behavioral, and observes that when a victim blames the injury on specific actions rather than one’s attributes as a person, it “helps restore a sense of control and may be adaptive in this way” (Landsman, “Crises of Meaning in Trauma and Loss,” 16–17). On the subject of the book of Lamentations and self-blame, see Christopher Frechette, “Daughter Babylon Raped and Bereaved (Isaiah 47): Symbolic Violence and Meaning-Making in Recovery from Trauma,” in *The Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, 79.

28. Ezekiel exemplifies the continuing loyalty to God’s commands of the exiles, but I have argued elsewhere (Daschke, *City of Ruins*, 70–81) that these violent, morbid sign acts represent a melancholic turning of his rage at God against himself. In another context, van der Kolk (*The Body Keeps the Score*, 133–34) observes that “The price of this loyalty is unbearable feelings of loneliness, despair, and the inevitable rage of helplessness. Rage that has nowhere to go is redirected against the self, in the form of depression, self-hatred, and self-destructive actions. One of my patients told me, ‘It’s like hating your home. . . .’ Nothing feels safe—least of all your own body.” Especially considering Ezekiel’s vision of the angels destroying the temple in chapters 8–9, van der Kolk’s observation seems entirely relevant to the prophet of the exile.


35. Even more than thirty years ago, John Bright was able to write in *A History of Israel* that “the popular notion of a total deportation which left the land empty and void is erroneous and to be discarded” (344).
36. Though it is very likely that the composer of this poem and much of his audience did actually lose their homes in or around Jerusalem in the onslaught against the city. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 344; Berlin and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1581.


39. Boyd Seevers’s presentation of the Babylonian conquest of Judah graphically depicts the systematic decimation of the city and its institutional structures as the dismemberment of a body, with the temple and royal palaces the “heart and vital organs” of the nation (*Warfare in the Old Testament*, 257–58).

40. Berlin and Brettler (*The Jewish Study Bible*, 1582) state that Lamentations may have been ritually recited at the ruins of the temple, bringing the literary home as traumatized body into alignment with the actual traumatized home, thus resymbolizing it and the Jews’ own physical, traumatized bodies through scripture.

41. Ibid., 1589. Perhaps there is even an unconscious perversion of the idea of the mother as “first home,” as the children return to their mothers’ bodies dead, the home that gave them life becoming their graves.

42. Ibid., 1582.