

Holy of Holies
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Lam 2:15

(BHS)	(RSV)
	1 All who pass along the way
סָפְקוּ עָלַיְךָ כַּפַּיִם	2 clap their hands at you;
כָּל־עַבְרֵי דָרֶךְ	3
אֶשְׂקוּ וַיִּנְעוּ רֹאשָׁם	4 they hiss and wag their heads
עַל־בֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם	5 at the daughter of Jerusalem;
הֲזֹאת הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר יֵאמְרוּ	6 “Is this the city which was called
כָּלִילַת יָפִי	7 the perfection of beauty,
מְשׁוֹשׁ לְכָל־הָאָרֶץ:	8 the joy of all the earth?”

Except for lines 1 and 3 going together, the English tracks pretty well with the Hebrew. Note the interrogative (in red), that warrants the question mark. Note also the *shin* prefix in line 6. Believe it or not, this is actually the relative pronoun. Remember, in Hebrew who is he. He is she. And *she* is who.

You think that’s crazy? Out of its mere 22 letters, Hebrew has two k’s, two v’s, two t’s, four s’s, no vowels, and two letters that make no sound at all. Speaking of 22 letters, take a look at the book of Lamentations. Chapter 1 has 22 verses. This is because the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, and each verse starts with a different letter, in alphabetical order. The other chapters also have either 22 or a multiple of 22. The idea is that Lamentations explores their grief fully and completely. Their lament is exhaustively expressed—from A to Z.

Anyway, in 1991 Ken Bailey wrote a short note in *The Expository Times* that touches upon our verse. He theorized that Mark’s gospel was written shortly after his beloved Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. And this affected how Mark theologically processed the crucifixion of his beloved Lord. It is as if Jesus’ death and the death of the city were of a piece. So much so, that Jesus replaces the city, and in his resurrection its life continues.

Look at our verse above. Perhaps when you first read it you were reminded of Jesus on the cross. Lam 2:16 follows, “All your enemies rail against you; they hiss, they gnash their teeth, they cry: ‘We have destroyed her! Ah, this is the day we longed for; now we have it; we see it!’” Sound familiar?

And *those who passed by* derided him, *wagging their heads*, and saying, “Aha! You who would *destroy* the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” (Mark 15:29 – 32a)

I followed some of Bailey’s italicizing to highlight a few parallels with Lamentations. Jesus had said that he could rebuild the Temple in three days (Mark 14:58). But he was speaking of his body. In other words, Jesus *is* the Temple. Bailey shows that Mark’s account is designed to set the dividing of Jesus’ garments parallel to the dividing of the Temple curtain.

The unveiling of Jesus is of one piece with the unveiling of the Holy of Holies. Let that sink in for a moment.

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“The most sacred focus of faith is no longer a darkened chamber at the back of a building seen only by the high priest once a year. Rather the new holy of holies is a *dying saviour*, unveiled on a hill before the *entire world*.”¹

And the lament at the destruction of the first Temple—seen in our verse—is best applied in Mark’s time not to the destruction of the second Temple, but rather to the crucifixion of the true Temple, namely Jesus. Which was restored after three days. Hallelujah!

Jerusalem, and the Temple, was the heart and soul of the Jewish life. Their identity was centered there, and in a real sense, to lose the Temple was to lose themselves. If Mark was able to find in Jesus a replacement even for that—

if he was able to turn from his catastrophic loss to the tragedy and subsequent joy of Jesus' passion and resurrection—then surely you and I can find in Jesus the answer when the bottom drops out of our own lives.

“I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8). “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21). And when our resurrected Lord returns for us, we also will be restored to glory. We are called to live in faith until that day. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!

¹ Bailey, p. 104, his italics.