

The "Widowed" City

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The motif of the "widowed" city¹ occurs four times in the Hebrew Bible² and once in Egyptian literature.³ While it has caused many problems of interpretation both for the biblical scholar⁴ and for the Egyptologist,⁵ no study dealing with all five occurrences has apparently ever been written.⁶ The first clue to a proper understanding of this motif is the legal definition of Akkadian *almattu* in the Middle Assyrian Laws.⁷ While usually translated 'widow', this term has been shown to denote only a very special kind of widow in legal terminology. Furthermore, both Hebrew *'almānāh*⁸ and Egyptian *ḥꜣrt* (*ḥꜣrt*),⁹ also usually translated 'widow', may likewise be taken to refer only to this special kind of widow in many cases. Conversely, when such a widow is not being described, all three of these terms are often conspicuously absent. It is precisely the concept of this special kind of widow, lexically attested in three different languages, which may now serve as the key to the "widowed" city motif, providing a satisfactory interpretation for all five passages.

1. The Akkadian Evidence

The term *almattu*, usually translated as 'widow'¹⁰ is very precisely defined in § 33 of the Middle Assyrian Laws (*MAL*).¹¹ Once a woman becomes a widow, it is the responsibility of

1 The author's conclusions concerning this motif in the Bible were first presented in his article "Widow," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), 16:487-91, for which the present study provides all the necessary evidence and adds the single occurrence in Egyptian literature.

2 Isaiah 47:8, 9; 54:4; Jeremiah 51:5; Lamentations 1:1.

3 W. Spiegelberg, "Der Siegeshymnus der Merneptah auf der Flinders Petrie-Steile," *ZÄS* 34 (1896), 9: lines 27-28.

4 See, e.g., J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, The Anchor Bible, 21 (New York, 1965), 356, on Jeremiah 51:5.

5 See, e.g., Spiegelberg, *Merneptah*, 24.

6 To my knowledge, no biblical commentator writing on the relevant biblical verses has ever referred to the Egyptian evidence, and no Egyptologist dealing with the Merneptah stela has ever compared the biblical evidence.

7 For the Akkadian evidence, see section 1 below.

8 For the Hebrew evidence, see section 2 below.

9 For the Egyptian evidence, see section 3 below.

10 E.g., *AHW*, 38 ('Witwe'); T. J. Meek in *ANET*³, 182 (§ 28,33 and *passim*).

11 The standard edition of the *MAL* is G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, *The Assyrian Laws* (Oxford, 1935) with transliterated text, translation, and philological and legal commentaries. This edition is brought up to date and much philological material is added in G. Cardascia, *Les Lois Assyriennes* (Paris, 1969). Less reliable is the translation of T. J. Meek in *ANET*³, 180-88.

an adult son¹² of her choice to support her, and she goes to live in his house. If she has no adult son, it is her father-in-law's duty to give her in marriage to one of his other sons or to marry her himself. The text then continues: *šumma mu[s]sa u ēmuša mētū u mārša laššu almattu šit . . .* "If her husband and her father-in-law are dead and she has no son, she is an *almattu* . . ." ¹³

Elsewhere in Mesopotamian law, the *almattu* is given special legal protection by the court,¹⁴ and her remarriage is binding even without a contract if she lives with her intended spouse for two years.¹⁵ However, in all the Mesopotamian law codes, women whose husbands have died, but who do have some means of financial support, are not given any particular title and are never called *almattu*.¹⁶ Thus, the *almattu* may be defined as "a once married woman who has no means of financial support and who is thus in need of special legal protection."¹⁷ Further evidence for this definition may be found in the usage of the abstract noun *almānūtu* 'lack of support by a male householder'¹⁸: *bēl bīti imātma bītu šū almānūtam illak* "The owner of the house will die and that house will have no male to support it."¹⁹

Finally, the statements made by Mesopotamian rulers²⁰ to demonstrate their great concern with the plight of the *almattu* are best understood in the light of the above definition.²¹ Hammurabi's rationale for the writing of his laws is typical of such statements: *dannum enšam ana lā ḥabālim ekūtam almattam šutēšurim* "In order that the mighty shall not wrong the weak, in order to provide justice for the homeless girl,²² and the once married woman without financial support."²³

2. The Hebrew Evidence

While the term '*almānāh*' must properly be translated 'widow' wherever it is juxtaposed with

12 While only the term DUMU = *māru* 'son' is used throughout this law (Driver, *Assyrian Laws*, 400, 402), it is clear from the Code of Hammurabi (CH) § 177 and MAL § 28 that a mature, adult son is meant. In both of these laws, the widow who has a son of low age is nevertheless called an *almattu*. See Driver, *Assyrian Laws*, 222, and especially Cardascia, *Lois Assyriennes*, 180.

13 Driver, *Assyrian Laws*, 402: lines 67-69.

14 MAL § 45 and CH § 177.

15 MAL § 34. Cf. CH § 128.

16 E.g., MAL § 46.

17 This definition was first proposed by Driver, *Assyrian Laws*, 225. It was further developed in CAD A¹, 364 and has lately been discussed again by R. Haase, *Einführung in das Studium Keilschriftlicher Rechtsquellen* (Wiesbaden, 1965), 6-7 and Cardascia, *Lois Assyriennes*, 180. The translation of *almattu* by the latter, however, as "veuve orpheline" is a bit misleading since it is the death of the father-in-law, not the father, which is implied in the definition.

18 CAD A¹, 362.

19 Boissier DA, 5:2. See CAD A¹, 362.

20 F. C. Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *JNES* 21 (1962), 129-39.

21 This point was already made by Haase, *Einführung*, 6-7: "Also: erst wenn die Witwe (in unserem Sinne) vom Familienverband losgelöst ist, wird sie 'Witwe' (nach assyrischen Recht). Das erklärt die Sorge der altorientalischen Herrscher für die 'Witwen und Waisen' die wir u.a. auch im Epilog des Codex Hammurabi oder im Alten Testament (Exodus 22,21) finden."

22 For this translation of *ekūtu*, see CAD E, 72 and especially the discussion on page 73.

23 CH xl:59-62 (epilogue).

terms having to do with marital status,²⁴ the definition "a once married woman who has no means of financial support and who is thus in need of special legal protection" is much more appropriate in contexts dealing with the protection of the rights of the socially disadvantaged classes in Israelite society.²⁵ Furthermore, in the case of at least one famous widow, the term *'almānāb* is used with precisely the same connotation which it has in the MAL. Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, is not called an *'almānāb* until she is told by her father-in-law to dwell in her father's household: "Dwell, *'almānāb*, in the household of your father."²⁶ By returning to her father's household, she is thus deprived of her father-in-law's support. Since, in addition, she has no adult son to support her,²⁷ she certainly falls under the definition of Akkadian *almattu* according to MAL § 33. Conversely, such widows as Abigail²⁸ and Bath-Sheba²⁹ are never called *'almānāb* because they probably did have some means of financial support.³⁰ The classic example of this latter category, however, is the Book of Ruth. Here, the entire story revolves around three widows, none of whom is ever called *'almānāb*. Ruth and Orpah are supported by Naomi, their mother-in-law,³¹ while Naomi herself was left some land by her deceased husband³² and is also partially supported by the gleanings from the field of Boaz, an unspecified relative of her late husband.³³

3. The Egyptian Evidence

ḥꜣrt (*ḥꜣrt*) is the regular term for 'widow' in Egyptian literature and is often to be translated as such, generically.³⁴ However, there are several passages which imply that this term is

²⁴ Leviticus 21:14; 22:13; Numbers 30:10; Ezekiel 44:22.

²⁵ Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11,14; 24:17,19-21; 26:12,13; 27:19; Isaiah 1:17,23; 10:2; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; 49:11; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5; Psalm 68:6; 94:6; 146:9; Proverbs 15:25; Job 22:9; 24:3; 31:16. That *'almānāb* does not simply denote 'widow' in these passages was already seen by Haase (see above, n. 21). The problem of translating *'almānāb* as 'widow' in the legal passages is underscored by the Rabbinical dilemma concerning the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:17 with respect to a rich widow (*Baba Mezi'a* 115a; cf. *Sanbedrin* 21a):

Mishna: One does not take a pledge from a widow whether she is poor or rich, for it is said (Deuteronomy 24:17): "Do not take a widow's garment as a pledge."

Gemarrab: Our Rabbis taught: "One does not take a pledge from a widow whether she is poor or rich." These are the words of R. Judah. R. Simeon said: "If she is rich, one does take a pledge from her; if she is poor, one does not take a pledge from her for you are obligated to return (it) to her and you might cause her a bad reputation among her neighbors."

²⁶ Genesis 38:11. Note that Tamar was previously referred to as simply *'ēšet 'āḥīkā/āḥīw* (Genesis 38:8,9).

²⁷ Genesis 38:8.

²⁸ 1 Samuel 25:2-42.

²⁹ 2 Samuel 11:2 - 12:25.

³⁰ Abigail's husband is referred to as wealthy (1 Samuel 25:2), while Bath-Sheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, is mentioned as one of David's chief mercenaries (2 Samuel 23:39).

³¹ Ruth 1. Orpah could well have been called *'almānāb* once she left the household of her mother-in-law. After leaving Naomi, however, she faded out of the picture completely and the narrator may not have been interested in relating her new social status. Contrast this with the case of Tamar above.

³² Ruth 4:3.

³³ Ruth 2-3.

³⁴ A. Erman and H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache* (Leipzig, 1926-31), 3:363 (hereafter cited as *Wb*).

at times to be understood as referring to a special kind of widow, a widow without support, in need of protection. Thus, we find the term *ḥꜣrt* (*ḥꜣrt*) juxtaposed with *nds* 'peasant',³⁵ *ḥꜣr* 'hungry man',³⁶ and *mꜣr* 'pauper'.³⁷ In Egyptian wisdom literature, oppression of the *ḥꜣrt* (*ḥꜣrt*) is singled out as especially unjust.³⁸ Her special legal status apparently exempted her (together with peasants and orphans) from the payment of certain taxes so as "to let breathe him who has fallen into wretchedness."³⁹ Her social position in general is underscored by the figurative use of the term *ḥꜣy* (*b'i*) 'husband'⁴⁰ as the title of one who protects her.⁴¹ Thus the social debility of the *ḥꜣrt* (*ḥꜣrt*) in these passages is not due to her lack of an actual husband, but to her need for special protection. That her change of marital status is not the primary concern in these cases is further demonstrated by a text in which a *male* scribe, contending that his master is not taking proper care of him, compares himself to a *ḥꜣrt*.⁴² It is therefore not surprising that many Egyptian rulers and officials took great pride in protecting the *ḥꜣrt* (*ḥꜣrt*) together with the other disadvantaged classes.⁴³ On the other hand, the term *ḥꜣrt* (*ḥꜣrt*) is conspicuously absent in contexts dealing with widows who have some means of support. Thus, in the Contendings of Seth and Horus, Isis turns herself into the widow of a cattleman whose son is tending his father's cattle.⁴⁴ Clearly, she can depend on her son and her husband's cattle for her support. She never calls herself a *ḥꜣrt* (*ḥꜣrt*) even though she is trying to elicit Horus' sympathy.

4. The Five Occurrences of the "Widowed" City Motif

From the evidence submitted above, it should be clear that the words usually translated as 'widow' in Akkadian, biblical Hebrew and Egyptian often refer not to just any widow but rather to "a once married woman who has no means of financial support and who is thus in need of special legal protection."⁴⁵ When applied to a city, this concept would undoubtedly designate a once independent city which has lost its independence and is now completely dependent upon another state for protection and survival. In short, *the "widowed" city motif*

35 P. E. Newberry, *Beni Hasan* (London, 1892), 1: plate VIII (Ameni):18; H. Goedicke, "A Neglected Wisdom Text," *JEA* 48 (1962), 26:10, 14-15.

36 Newberry, *Beni Hasan*, 1: plate VIII (Ameni): 20

37 R. Anthes, *Die Felseninschriften von Hatnub* (Leipzig, 1928), # 20:7.

38 W. Golénischeff, *Les papyrus hieratiques no. 1115, 1116A, et 1116B de l'Ermitage Impérial à St. Pétersbourg* (St. Petersburg, 1913), plate 10: 47 (Merikare); E. A. W. Budge, *Facsimiles of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum. Second Series* (London, 1923), 7, 14-15 (Amenemopet, chapter 6).

39 Goedicke, *Wisdom Text*, 26:14-15 and translation on p. 27. While the specific extent of the tax exemption is unknown because of an unfortunate lacuna at that point, the general import of the text is quite clear. See also Goedicke's attempted restoration on p. 34.

40 *Wb*, 2:475.

41 See the passages listed in *Wb* 2: 475, 11 and note in addition the extended use of this metaphor by Ramesses II who labels himself *b'i n kmt* "husband" of all Egypt," Yoyotte, *Kêmi* X, plate VI:8-9 (A).

42 A. H. Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Miscellanies* (Brussels, 1937), 75 (Anastasi VI): 32-33. See also R. A. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies* (London, 1964), 281 (translation) and 288-89 (commentary).

43 For references, See Fensham, "Widow, Orphan and the Poor . . .," 132-34, and P. W. Pestman, *Marriage and Matrimonial Property in Ancient Egypt* (Leiden, 1961), 78, n. 2.

44 Papyrus Chester Beatty I (Horus and Seth) 6, 8-9 and 7, 3-5 (=A. H. Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Stories*, [Brussels, 1932], 44-45:6,8-6,9 and 46:7,3-7,5).

45 See n. 17.

seems to refer to a once independent city which has become a vassal of another state. Aside from the evidence already submitted, much additional support for this interpretation may be found in these five texts themselves.

A. Isaiah 47:8-9a

And now, hear this O pleasurable one (Babylon)
 who dwells securely (*lābētaḥ*),
 Who thinks to herself—"I am and there is no one else.
 I will never dwell as an '*almānāb*' and I will
 never know bereavement (*šēkôl*)."
 Both will come upon you at once suddenly—bereavement
 (*šēkôl*) and '*almôn*'.⁴⁶

Here it is clear that dwelling as an '*almānāb*' is the opposite of dwelling securely (*lābētaḥ*). The punishment envisioned for Babylon is one of measure for measure divine retribution.⁴⁷ She who once was *g^ebēreṭ mamlākôt* 'mistress of kingdoms',⁴⁸ who subjugated many nations, will now be subjugated herself. She who once had many vassals will herself be a vassal.

B. Isaiah 54:4

Do not fear for you will not be put to shame;
 Do not be confounded for you will not be abashed.
 For you will forget the shame of your youth,
 And the dishonor of your '*almānūt*',⁴⁹ you will
 no longer remember.

The exilic prophet is here assuring Judah that she is soon to begin a new life as an independent nation and she will soon forget the days of her vassalship to Babylon and her subsequent destruction. '*alm^enūtayik*' clearly refers to the period of Judah's vassalship, a period of national disgrace which the prophet here wishes to erase from the minds of the people.

C. Jeremiah 51:5⁵⁰

⁴⁶ '*almôn*' is the abstract of '*almānāb*' equal in meaning to '*almānūt*' (see Isaiah 54:4 and n. 48 below). The parallel pair *ḵl//ulmn* occurs likewise in Ugaritic (CTA 23:8-9) for which see now M. Dahood, *Ras Shamra Parallels* (Rome, 1972), 1:378 (#599) where a complete bibliography is given. For the apparent difference in vocalization between Ugaritic *ulmn* and Hebrew '*almôn*', see H. L. Ginsberg and B. Maisler, "Semitised Hurrians in Syria and Palestine," *JPOS* 14 (1934), 259. Note finally that IQIs^a reads *šēkôl w^e almānāb* in this passage.

⁴⁷ For this principle of divine retribution see L. I. Rabinowitz, "Reward and Punishment," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), 14:134-36 and the article by M. Lichtenstein in this *Festschrift*.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 47:5.

⁴⁹ '*almānūt*' is the abstract form of '*almānāb*' found elsewhere only in Genesis 38:14,19 regarding Tamar (see above, section two) and in 2 Samuel 20:3 where the text is very uncertain.

⁵⁰ This verse has long been considered a crux. Note for example the remarks of J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Bible, 21 (New York, 1965), 356: "The sense of the verse is disputed and one feels it is intrusive . . ." The intrusiveness of this verse as it was generally understood was due to the fact that in

For Israel and Judah were not made 'almān⁵¹ because of⁵² its⁵³ (Babylon's) gods, but rather⁵⁴ because of the Lord of Hosts; Their (Israel's and Judah's) land was full of guilt on account of the Holy One of Israel.

In this oracle against Babylon, Jeremiah here states the reason for Babylon's punishment. Babylon has haughtily contended that she has caused Judah's downfall, that she has made both Judah and Israel into vassals. But in fact, she, like Assyria, has only been God's agent of judgment⁵⁵ and has no right to take credit for His deeds. This prophetic theme is common in the foreign oracles⁵⁶ and fits into this chapter perfectly.

D. Lamentations 1:1bc⁵⁷

this position one would expect a justification for Babylon's punishment, not a discussion of Israel's and Judah's guilt. Note finally the comments of N. H. Tur-Sinai, (*P^lšūtô šel miqrā'* [Jerusalem, 1967], 3/1:259 [in Hebrew]): "Such a verse which is predicated on the guilt of Judah and Israel, as many have seen, does not fit here as a justification for Babylon's destruction, and one can not help but feel that both the language and content of this verse are corrupt."

51 'almān is the masculine counterpart of 'almānāh and is here being used collectively.

52 The causative use of *min* (GK, § 119z) is well attested before divine names. See, e.g., Genesis 24:50; Joshua 11:20; Judges 14:4; 1 Kings 2:15; Psalm 37:23; 118:23; 2 Chronicles 22:7.

53 The attribution of these suffixes to the wrong antecedents is one of the reasons why this verse has remained a crux. It is suggested here that the singular third person *w* of *ʿlōhāyw* refers to Babylon, while the plural third person *m* of *ʿaršām* refers to Israel and Judah.

54 The particle *kî* 'but rather' has been placed here rather than after *š^ebā'ōt*. Both *kî* and *kî'im* are used after negative sentences to introduce the antithesis (GK § 163a). *kî* used alone in this way may be found in Genesis 17:15; 18:15; 19:2; 24:3-4; 42:12; 45:8; Exodus 1:19; 16:8; Deuteronomy 21:16-17; Joshua 5:14; 1 Samuel 12:12; 2 Samuel 16:18; 24:24; 1 Kings 2:30; 3:22; 21:15; Isaiah 28:27; 30:5; Psalm 118:17.

55 Jeremiah 50:20-23; cf. Isaiah 10:5.

56 E.g., Isaiah 10:5-15.

57 Lamentations 1:1a is problematic in that the generally accepted translation, although philologically sound, does not seem to fit in with the rest of the verse. The normally accepted translation (H. J. Kraus, *Klagelieder*, Biblisches Kommentar, Altes Testament, 20 [Neukirch-Vluyn, 1956], 16; H. L. Ginsberg, *The Five Megilloth and Jonah* [Philadelphia, 1969], 35; and D. R. Hillers, *Lamentations*, Anchor Bible, 7A [New York, 1972], 1), is as follows: "Alas! Lonely sits the city that once was full of people." This translation is philologically based on the usage of *bādād* in Isaiah 27:10 where it is parallel to *ne'ezāb kammidbār* 'forsaken like a desert' probably implying depopulation, and the phrase *rabat bānīm* in 1 Samuel 2:5 signifying 'having many sons'. However, what seems to be called for here is a statement concerning the political situation of Judah parallel to the rest of the verse, not a discussion of her depopulation. While the philological and syntactical problems are too involved to enter into here in detail, the following points should suffice to indicate the possibility of a different line of approach:

a. *Šākan/yāšab* (*l^e*) *bādād* is often used of nations idiomatically to imply "political security, independence and the like." In the three occurrences of this idiom, it is parallel to *šākan/yāšab* (*la*) *bētaḥ* which means precisely the same (Numbers 23:9; Deuteronomy 33:28; Jeremiah 49:31; for the emendation in Numbers 23:9 and a general discussion of these two idioms, see S. Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* [Chicago, 1963], 60-61).

b. As noted above (see the commentary to Isaiah 47:8-9a), the idiom *yāšab* (*lā*) *bētaḥ* appears to be the exact opposite of *yāšab k^e 'almānāh*. Since *yāšab* (*l^e*) *bādād* is regularly parallel to *yāšab* (*lā*) *bētaḥ* (see immediately above), there is no reason why *yāšab bādād* 'to dwell securely, independently' could not be

She that was a mistress⁵⁸ among the nations has become like an 'almānāb.
The princess among the states has become tributary.⁵⁹

Here Judah is described as a city once independent, which has become a vassal to another state. The parallelism of *bāy^etāb k^e'almānāb* and *bāy^etāb lāmas* makes this interpretation virtually certain. The historical event being referred to is of course the destruction and subjugation of Judah by Babylon in 587/586. The general similarity of the theme of this verse to that of Isaiah 47:8-9a (see above) is further corroborative evidence.

E. Stele of Merneptah: 27-28⁶⁰

Ḥ3rw ḥprw m ḥ3rt n T3-mr'i

Greater Palestine⁶¹ has become a *ḥ3rt* to Egypt.

Here all lands are said to have been pacified and subjugated by the Egyptian king. Certainly the idea that Greater Palestine has become a vassal to Egypt is aptly expressed in this context and thereby a solution is found to a difficult exegetical problem in this text.⁶²

construed as a direct opposite to *bāy^etāb k^e'almānāb* 'became like a vassal state' in our verse.

c. As suggested by T. F. McDaniel, "Philological Studies in Lamentations I," *Biblica* 49 (1968), 29-31, *rabbātī 'ām* like *rabbātī baggōyīm* may be an honorific title based on the honorific appellative *rbt* 'lady', 'mistress' which is attested in Ugaritic, Phoenician and Punic epithets. Thus *rabbātī 'ām* would refer to the glorious past when Judah was politically secure and independent. Such a reference to the glorious past of a city as a contrast to its dismal present and immediate future is very similar to the description of Babylon in Isaiah 47 (see above).

d. While modern scholars divide Lamentations 1:1 into three bi-cola, the Masoretic division was apparently into two tri-cola with the *'atnaḥ* on the word *k^e'almānāb*. If the above points are correct, and if the resultant syntactical problems can be satisfactorily solved, the correct division would in fact be the Masoretic one. The proper translation (ignoring the syntactical problems) would then be approximately as follows:

Alas! The city which (?) was (once) politically secure,
the mistress of the populace, has become like a vassal;
The mistress among the nations, the princess among the states,
has become tributary.

58 McDaniel, *Lamentations I*, 29-31 and see point three of the previous note.

59 See Deuteronomy 20:11; Judges 1:30,35; Isaiah 31:8.

60 For a complete bibliography, see *ANET*³, 376. The edition of the text utilized here is that of Spiegelberg, *Merneptah*, 1-25.

61 See the passages listed in *Wb* 3: 232:7 and the important comments in A. H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* (Oxford, 1947), 1:181*-87*. Finally, see *ANET*³, 378, n. 19.

62 See n. 5 above and also cf. the comments of R. J. Williams in D. W. Thomas ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York, 1961), 141. Williams' contention that Hurru is here being described "as husbandless, and so lacking a defender against her enemies" is impossible because it does not explain how Hurru has become a *ḥ3rt to Egypt*, and does not fit the biblical passages referred to above. Finally, cf. also H. W. Grapow, *Die bildlichen Ausdrücke des Ägyptischen* (Leipzig, 1924), 134-35.