Sometimes the afterlife of a biblical verse can depart sharply from what was apparently its original sense; indeed, sometimes this new sense can double back and change forever the way readers think about the larger text to which it belongs, or change the character of its reputed author. In the following I would like to explore the formation of one important aspect of Jeremiah’s “image” in early post-biblical times that developed from a single verse in the Book of Lamentations, Lam 3:1, which begins: “I am the man who has known affliction….”

The words seem quite straightforward, yet they have inspired all manner of interpretation in modern scholarship. The focus of the preceding two chapters, and sometimes the actual speaker quoted therein (1:9, 11, 15, etc.), has been a female figure called בת ציון, Lady Zion, the emblem of the people of Judah. She is described in chapter 1 of Lamentations as a widow weeping bitterly; jeered by her enemies, she has no comforter. This female is likewise the focus of the second chapter: there she is still referred to as בת ציון (as well as בת ירושלם) and is still the object of pity. But then suddenly in chapter 3 a new figure appears, identifying himself as a גבר, a word with quite different associations. A biblical גבר is generally a young man in the prime of life, brimming with strength, as the verbal root g-b-r (“be strong, mighty”) itself suggests, particular via the noun from the same root, גבורה, “strength” or “power.” The sudden appearance of this גבר in Lamentations 3 is therefore somewhat jarring; moreover, what is more, his full self-identification as a גבר “who has known affliction” seems almost an oxymoron. Why choose this word?

Scholars have of course connected this act of self-identification itself with that found in Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Phoenician royal inscriptions, in which the mighty king starts off by saying “I am So-and-so”—and this is usually the opening salvo in an extended piece of self-glorification, to which “I am the גבר who has known affliction” hardly seems related. We might come a bit closer with Qohelet’s self-presentation, “I Qohelet was king in Jerusalem over Israel” (Eccl 1:12), which does not lead into boasting, but into an account of his
discouraging search for wisdom. Still, this does little to explain the riddle of this person’s not being simply a man, an איש who has known affliction, but a youthful, manly גבר. Recent commentators have therefore put forward various suggestions to explain the apparent oxymoron: the speaker is an anonymous “frustrated soldier,” who survived the siege of Jerusalem,1 or one of the Temple singers exiled to Babyloni,2 or perhaps a known individual, such as Jehoiachin,3 Zedekiah,4 or the high priest Seraiah;5 or perhaps he is simply the “collective voice of the people,” or actually, Lady Zion sub specie hominis.6 None of these proposals seems particularly persuasive, indeed, the idea that the גבר is some sort of collective or personified being7 only heightens the mystery: why suddenly abandon the collective female בyt ציון in favor of this male newcomer—and why make him a manly גבר “who has known affliction.”

Jacob Klein presents a novel interpretation in his recent commentary on Lamentations.8 He points out that the equivalent of the word גבר in Akkadian is eṭlu(m). According to the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, an eṭlu, like a גבר, is usually a “young man,” “able-bodied,” vigorous and the like, while the noun eṭluṭu means “manliness,” “strength,” etc., very much like Hebrew גבורה.9 There is, however, another, rather specialized use of eṭlu in Akkadian: it is sometimes used to designate the “righteous sufferer,” someone who, although righteous, is being punished for some sin, a circumstance that causes him to ask probing questions about the nature of divine justice. (Why the righteous sufferer should be specifically an eṭlu is unclear; perhaps questioning divine justice in time of suffering was felt to be more typical of the vigorous youth than the elderly sage,

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6 Among others: Ulrich Berges, Klageleider (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 183–85.
7 See e.g. D. Hillers, Lamentations (Anchor Bible) (New York: Doubleday, 1972) which presents the speaker as “Everyman,” 109.