Constant, unrelieved complaint is the outstanding characteristic of the book of Lamentations, as the poet portrays, in the darkest possible terms, the fate of ruined Jerusalem and the agony of her inhabitants at home and in exile. The anguish becomes unbearable as he recalls Jerusalem’s past power and glory, in sharp contrast to the triumph of the adversaries who have destroyed her, trampling her inhabitants into despair (i 5a, 9c, ii 16, 17, iii 46, 58-63, iv 21).

The poet of Lamentations shows a great depth of compassion for the suffering people; his feelings, however, do not tempt him either to sentimental optimism or to despair. He is clearly both a theologian, at home with intellectual synthesis, and a prophet of exceptional courage, and he penetrates to the real cause of the disaster clearly and unflinchingly. Everything has happened as a result of Israel’s guilt both past and present; Israel has abandoned her God. The vocabulary of Lamentations bears this out: God’s wrath is expressed as constantly and as forcefully as the misery of the people. 2

The poet insists, even at moments of extreme suffering, that the source of Israel’s present misfortune is, simply and solely, personal guilt; and he is thus an apologist for God’s righteousness and justice. Inevitably, in their intense suffering, the people begin to ask what has happened to their God, to be assailed by doubt about ...
his almightiness, faithfulness, and mercy, to doubt even the traditional belief in their election. However, the poet does not share their despair and speaks of the urgent need for conversion. This alone, he declares, is the way out of distress, for God is, in essence, benevolent and merciful, and thus he punishes only for a limited time.\(^3\)

1. Guilt and punishment

After introductory descriptions of destroyed Jerusalem and the misery of exile (i 1-4), the poet touches upon the greatest pain, the malicious triumph of the adversaries (i 51). Here he reveals profound prophetic vision when he sees, beyond the horror of the situation, the fate of guilty Israel. In i 5 he says:

Her foes have become the head,  
her enemies prosper,  
because the Lord has made her suffer  
for the multitude of her transgressions

\((\text{cal rob-pēšäeyhā})\)...

The poet uses the word peša\(^4\), in essence meaning rebellion, to describe Israel’s sin. Thus Israel’s guilt is extremely heavy.\(^4\) The Lord responds with punishment, thereby revealing his authority and sovereignty.

In the first elegy, the poet talks of the causal link between guilt and the present misfortune in vv. 8a, 14a and 18a. In v. 8a we read:

Jerusalem sinned grievously \((hēť? haṭeťá),\)^5  
therefore she became filthy...


\(^5\) hēť? may be classed as the internal or absolute object, also named schema etymologicum or figura etymologica; consequently, the vocalization need not be altered to haṭō in the sense of infinitive absolute. See E. Kautzsch and A.E. Cowley, Geœnius’ Hebrew Grammar (2nd edn, Oxford, 1910) § 117p.