



Samuel Hildebrandt – Ekaterina E. Kozlova (eds.), *Loneliness in the Hebrew Bible* (The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 718; London: Clark 2025) Pp. 248. £ 64.60 (E-Book); £ 108 (Hardback). ISBN: 978-05-67-71445-9 (E-Book); 978-05-67071444-2 (Hardback)

Marcin Zieliński

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
marcin.zielinski@kul.pl
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9965-2196>

The book *Loneliness in the Hebrew Bible* is an interesting reflection on the phenomenon of loneliness, which has become even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been associated with isolation and experiences of loneliness, raising questions about the nature and meaning of this phenomenon. This analysis was undertaken by ten authors, who are briefly introduced at the beginning of the publication (viii–ix). The editors of the book are Samuel Hildebrandt (Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Nazarene Theological College, UK) and Ekaterina E. Kozlova (Old Testament Lecturer at London School of Theology, UK).

In the introduction to the book, the editors, starting from Hesse's poem about loneliness, show the timelessness of this problem, which has been strongly emphasised by the pandemic and the resulting restrictions on movement and opportunities to meet. The issue of loneliness has been the subject of numerous studies in psychological and sociological research. Attempts have also been made to define this phenomenon, described as an emotional state, and to distinguish it from social exclusion. The phenomenon itself seems to be related to the development of civilisation, which creates useful structures, but at the same time, makes people very autonomous and, as a consequence, lonely. It is also present in the ancient world, although it is not always explicitly defined, and the monograph aims to examine the vocabulary and texts that can shed light on the understanding of the problem of loneliness.

The book has 10 chapters, which are contributions from researchers invited to create this book. Each chapter contains a bibliography that includes both biblical sources and numerous philosophical, psychological, and sociological studies. This suggests an interdisciplinary approach to researching this topic in the Hebrew Bible. The book also includes an index of modern authors (pp. 221–228) and an index of references (pp. 229–231), which makes it easier for the reader to find authors or biblical texts of interest.

In the first chapter (pp. 9–33), Sonia Noll analyses biblical vocabulary related to the theme of loneliness. She first presents various definitions of loneliness, understood as a lack of satisfying personal relationships, perceived social isolation, or sadness caused by

the absence of friends or companionship, and discusses their understanding in the context of contemporary culture. She then examines vocabulary related to loneliness and its translation into English and ancient biblical versions. She also gives examples of biblical characters to whom her linguistic analyses can be applied.

Karolien Vermeulen, in her article on loneliness in the story of Hagar (pp. 35–54), takes up the theme of loneliness as a spatial category, in which the image of the desert emphasises her loneliness and the loss of her original position and relationships. She shows how this situation changes for the better through the visit of an angel, as well as Hagar's second departure from Abraham's house in Gen 21.

In the third chapter (pp. 55–72), Christie Gilfeather describes the loneliness of widows and orphans in the Hebrew Bible. She briefly presents the situation of the family and the etymological meaning of the Hebrew word for 'widow'. She then analyses the situation of orphans in selected biblical texts and ways of overcoming this loneliness.

The fourth chapter (pp. 73–93) by Holly Morse, deals with the loneliness of women in the context of abuse, isolation, and social stigmatisation. She notes the close association between shame and loneliness, and then analyses the theme of loneliness in Lam 1 and 2 Sam 13 in relation to the experience of sexual abuse.

Next, Ekaterina E. Kozlova, in chapter five (pp. 95–121), analyses Qoh 4:9 and the theme of loneliness as a context that can make work a difficult and boring experience, especially when satisfaction from work and a sense of professional fulfilment are expected. She then explores the theme of work and social isolation in ANE Sources and ancient Israel. She briefly analyses the theme of loneliness in Qoh 4:9, but also devotes a surprising amount of space to the case of Elijah. Elijah seems to become the dominant theme of the biblical analysis, due to the amount of attention devoted to him and the fact that Qohelet does not appear in the summary of the article.

In chapter six (pp. 123–140), Heather A. McKay writes about the loneliness of Me-phibosheth in the David cycle. She briefly describes the situation of Saul's descendant and the impact of his lameness on his life, and then analyses three words – silent, silenced, and mute – in the context of his story. Although the biblical text does not explicitly mention loneliness, the author accurately brings out all aspects of his isolation and helplessness in the face of historical necessities.

Chapter seven (pp. 141–162) is a reflection on the role of animals in human life and in overcoming loneliness, written by Suzanna Millar. Starting from the definition of loneliness as the negative experience of living with unmet social needs, she shows how the company of animals might be considered to mitigate human loneliness. She notes the evolution of this relationship, which was once associated with specific human needs (protection, transportation, food, wool, etc.), and now makes domestic animals companions in human loneliness. She then analyses selected biblical images from Gen 2–3, the Book of Job, and 2 Sam 12. In conclusion, she emphasises once again that the companionship of animals can fulfil human social needs, although these biblical images also reveal significant limitations and shortcomings.

The theme of loneliness in the Psalms is taken up by Philip S. Johnston in chapter eight (pp. 163–175). The Book of Psalms, which contains many joyful hymns and encourages the praise of God, contains a surprising number of moments of sadness and loneliness. Approaching aloneness in the Psalms, the author aptly notes that one cannot begin only with vocabulary, but must focus on specific images that he seeks in the first book (Psalms 1–41). He divides the psalms into four groups, depending on the degree to which this theme appears in the text, and identifies seven psalms where the theme is clearly marked and two psalms (22 and 38) where the issue of loneliness is evident. The author limits himself to a brief analysis of the texts and, in the final sentence of the summary, emphasises the aspect of God's presence in this loneliness, stating that 'the divine companionship, for all its complexity, can and does mitigate this.'

In chapter nine (pp. 177–195), Samuel Hildebrandt emphasises the positive aspects of loneliness in Lam 3 and the Hebrew Bible. He draws inspiration from Petrarch's *Life of Solitude* and from the context of contemporary culture, where loneliness can be experienced as something good and positive, provided one is able to experience loneliness, even though it is also a difficult experience. The author then analyses the longest and central chapter of the Book of Lamentations (chapter 3). He emphasises the existence of positive aspects related to the loneliness of the individual and its impact on the wider community. At the same time, he points out that loneliness in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, is not considered a desirable experience.

Finally, the tenth chapter, written by David J. Reimer, addresses the theme of God's loneliness (pp. 197–219). The author, frequently referring to G.K. Chesterton, writes about the nature of God and his superiority over the whole world, which may give the impression that God lives in loneliness. He then presents interpretations of this topic among Jewish authors. He also analyses the problem of defining loneliness and briefly discusses texts in which the issue of God's loneliness may appear (Gen 3; Deut 6; Isa 63; Psalm 86; 1 Kgs 19; Job 1–2). However, the author clearly states that there are no texts in the Hebrew Bible that explicitly depict God's loneliness.

The study addresses an interesting and very topical issue imposed by the social situation. This is a valid approach because, although the Bible is primarily a book that reveals God, it also deals with human history, with all aspects of human existence – both positive and negative. This perspective can help to interpret the problem of loneliness in the context of the current situation and to build bridges between the biblical text and the present day, since the authors often approach the topic in an interdisciplinary manner, referring not only to biblical research, but also to achievements in the human sciences.

In my opinion, the study lacks an attempt to describe this topic in general terms throughout the Bible, showing both the negative and the possible positive aspects of loneliness. Such a synthesis would allow the reader to better understand the topic. It would also be valuable to show ways of overcoming loneliness and to emphasise more strongly the role of God as a reality that accompanies humans in moments of the deepest loneliness.

