

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #05: Eikha: Theology and Human Suffering (Part I)

Methodology: Theology of Disaster

God's punitive measures incite a range of emotions within the nation. Reeling from anger, pain, confusion, shame, and outrage, the nation confronts God in the book of *Eikha*. This is to be expected. After all, enemies have destroyed the world that Israel knows and upon which she depends. Formerly immutable presuppositions of an eternal city under God's special protection lie crushed under the rubble of Jerusalem; the world is a wreck of long-held beliefs that have been shattered.¹ Incomprehensible divine conduct begets the frightening possibility of an irrevocable fissure in the relationship between God and His nation.

Eikha views God in a variety of ways, at times going so far as to depict God as either indifferent or hostile to Israel – even as Israel's enemy. Before examining *Eikha's* view of God, we must ask: To what extent does Jewish tradition regard such extreme depictions as legitimate? After all, is not reverence a prerequisite for and a central element of the relationship with God? And if so, does reverence preclude the ability to react negatively to God's deeds, to question bitterly God's inscrutable designs?

Philosophers of religion and rabbinic sources have developed different approaches to the problem of why a just God permits human suffering.² However, one thing is clear: piety does not prevent biblical figures from questioning God's ways, often in a less than measured manner.

Consider Abraham, who heatedly probes God's decision to destroy the cities of the plain: "Will the Judge of the world not do justice?!" (*Bereishit* 18:25). Or Moses, who challenges God in a similar tone, plaintively asking: "Why have You done evil to this nation; why have You sent me?" (*Shemot* 5:22). Isaiah boldly thrusts a measure of responsibility upon God for Israel's errant ways: "Why, God, do You make us stray from Your paths; why do You harden our hearts from

¹ See e.g. *Micah* 3:11; *Tehillim* 46:6; 48:9, as we discussed in previous chapters.

² For a good overview, see Byron L. Sherwin, "Theodicy," in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 959-970.

revering You?” (*Isaiah* 63:17). Habakkuk digs in his heels, asserting his intentions to station himself and remain standing until God answers his theological queries (*Habakkuk* 2:1).³ Several notable chapters of *Tehillim* fling a litany of complaints against God, cataloguing and questioning the myriad ways in which God has grieved humans: “Until when, God; will You forget me for eternity? Until when will You hide Your face from me? Until when will I have cares in my soul, daily anguish in my heart? Until when will my enemies rise against me?” (*Tehillim* 13:2-3).⁴

The great prophets ask these sorts of questions **because** they believe in God’s justice, because they wish to probe and understand the great mystery that underlies the relationship between God and humans. They hold firm to a faith in a God that allows questions and in a religious quest that is genuine and fraught, an apt reflection of life.

Nevertheless, some readers still find these biblical complaints uncomfortable, and even theologically inappropriate. Who are we to question God’s ways? Perhaps we must simply accept them and remain silent while God implements His impenetrable, but undoubtedly righteous, plans.

In his commentary to *Tehillim* 89:1, Ibn Ezra recounts a story of his encounter with a wise and pious man from Spain who refused to read *Tehillim* 89 because of its harsh words against God.⁵ In a response to Ibn Ezra, Radak (*Tehillim* 89:39) demurs from the anonymous detractor, maintaining that the man’s objection is illegitimate, as he rejects the *Tanakh* itself. Tradition regards all passages of the *Tanakh* as prophetically inspired, derived from God. It seems, then, that God endorses human questioning, which emerges from an honest and mature attempt to grapple with one’s relationship with God and the world that He created.

In later chapters, we will discuss *Eikha*’s portrait of God. It is undeniable that *Eikha* presents God as bearing enmity to Israel (e.g. *Eikha* 2:4-5); instead of questioning this depiction, we will endeavor to understand what it means. We will scrutinize how God’s harsh punishments are presented in the book. In doing so,

³ In a well-known Talmudic incident (*Ta’anit* 23a), Honi Ha-Me’agel imitates Habakkuk when he draws a circle and asserts that he will not move until God sends the people rain. Despite some opposition to Honi’s audacious demands, incidents such as this indicate that human boldness before God did not cease with the Bible and continued to assert itself throughout Jewish literature.

⁴ A unique book that allows humans to use a full range of emotional experiences to express their relationship with God, *Tehillim* contains many such examples of a human voice that probes God’s ways, asking difficult questions. See e.g. *Tehillim* 74:1, 10-11; 79:5; 80:5.

⁵ In his commentary, Ibn Ezra sometimes refers explicitly to R. Yehuda Halevi as a wise man from Spain. Based on this, some identify this anonymous man cited by Ibn Ezra as the famed author of the *Kuzari*, R. Yehuda Halevi. See N. Elyakim, “Connections between R. Yehuda Halevi and R. A. Ibn Ezra in Interpretations of the Bible,” *Shema’atin* 133-134 (1998), pp. 88 [Hebrew].

our goal is not, God forbid, to decrease reverence or love for God, nor to hurl unchecked anger at God, but rather to carefully engage in a frank discourse on *Eikha's* view of God's role in the catastrophes that Israel experiences. This reading is guided by *yir'at shamayim* and by a desire to mine this biblical book for its inspired meaning. I hope to fairly represent the goals of the book and to uncover the complex, candid, and profound manner in which the book guides us to contend with the relationship between humans and their Creator.

Introduction: Theology of Disaster

The national catastrophe of the destruction and exile of the Judean kingdom, the fall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Temple are pivotal biblical events. Biblical history comes to a screeching halt; its forward trajectory, beginning with Abraham's journey to Canaan in *Bereishit* 12, seems to terminate with the exile of his descendants from that same land in *II Kings* 25. Years of sinning, despite prophetic exhortations, led to unmitigated disaster. The Judean exiles seem doomed to oblivion; after all, the Northern Kingdom never returned from its exile.⁶ Overcome by a thundering silence, Israel's historical narrative appears to have drawn to a calamitous conclusion, as the nation seems destined to fade away in its exilic state. Only snippets of information emerge in the Bible regarding Israel in Babylonia,⁷ scattered verses that offer vague and allusive data about the community. This omission resonates ominously for Israel's continued national sustainability.⁸

Uncertainty and doubt abound. To survive, Israel must cope with the urgent questions that will determine its future. Practical questions aside, the book of *Eikha* must contend with the theological conundrums that arise from its dashed

⁶ We have noted that individuals do seem to trickle back from the exile during the period of Josiah. Nevertheless, the northern exiles never returned as a group and never resumed control over their land.

⁷ As for the community that escapes to Egypt after the destruction (*Jeremiah* 43-44), Jeremiah prophesies their total annihilation, save for a few who will escape and return to Judah (*Jeremiah* 44:26-28).

⁸ Fragmented descriptions of life in Babylonia appear in later chapters of *Isaiah* (e.g. 48:20), as well as some chapters of *Tehillim* (e.g. 137:1). Ezekiel dwells in Babylonia, but his prophecies are concentrated at the beginning of the period of exile (his final dated prophecy is in 570 BCE; see *Ezekiel* 29:17, as well as Radak, *Ezekiel* 1:1, for an explanation of the thirtieth year) and tend to concentrate more on Jerusalem than on the community in Babylonia. The book of *Daniel* situates itself in the Babylonian exile, but focuses on Daniel's role in the Babylonian court, rather than on the community. The book of *Esther* takes place in exile, but likely during a post-exilic period of Persian hegemony.

A recent exhibit in the Bible Land museum ("By the Rivers of Babylon") featured recently discovered tablets that constitute the earliest evidence acquired that date back to the Judean community exiled to Babylon in 586 BCE. These tablets reveal a prosperous and secure community, autonomous landowners involved in trade and business. But biblical historical narrative only picks up again in *Ezra*, which recounts a (partial) communal post-exilic return to Israel.

national aspirations. Predictably, questions arise regarding God's nature, omnipotence, and goodness.⁹

A second set of questions contemplates the role the nation plays in these and future events: Israel's chosen status, her sins, and the measure of her culpability. These questions are exacerbated by the inexplicable death of the righteous King Josiah, in spite of his religious reforms, a tragic event that seems to contradict the doctrine of retribution and reward.¹⁰

A third topic revolves around the relationship between God and His nation. Is this relationship eternal, as God had promised? Is it immutable? What does it mean for Israel when God appears to have abandoned His city? How could God allow the rise of a ferocious and evil enemy that brutally subjugates His nation?

Notwithstanding these resonant questions, *Eikha's* theology is notably elusive,¹¹ as it lacks a straightforward or systematic theology. Glaring absences from the book include an explicit inventory of Israel's sins, a consistent portrayal of God's nature, and a clear notion of how to explain the catastrophic events. God's voice is notably missing from *Eikha*, along with the customary biblical themes that commonly indicate Israel's enduring relationship with Him: God's covenant with the forefathers, His role in delivering Israel from Egypt, and His eternal love for Davidic kings. The book does not offer clear instructions for the nation to help them heal the traumatized relationship with God and restore communication with Him.

Although the book lacks a clear-cut theology, theological topics come up in the book, eliciting the reader's attention, even as we remain focused on the misery of

⁹ Scholars continue to dispute whether *Eikha* is a book of theodicy, one that endeavors to justify God's benevolence. See, for example, J. Renkema, "Theodicy in Lamentations?" in A. Laato and J. C. de Moor (eds.), *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 415-428; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (IBC; Louisville, 2002), pp. 27-33. Like Dobbs-Allsopp, I believe that the book contains both theodic and anti-theodic strains, vacillating on the issue of God's goodness from one chapter to the next. In doing so, *Eikha* shies away from a clear theodicy, instead constructing a rich and polyvalent portrait of Jerusalem's perception of God in the wake of the exile. I will attempt to establish and illustrate this fluctuation throughout this study. At the conclusion of our study, I will collect the various approaches to God's justice in a chapter that examines the structure of the book and the manner in which the book's form reflects its theological complexity.

¹⁰ See e.g. *Vayikra* 26 and *Devarim* 28, which clearly state that if Israel obeys God, they will receive blessings and peace. Gottwald, *Lamentations*, pp. 50-52, views the tension between faith in this doctrine and the historical reality as the central theological question in the book.

¹¹ Some scholars maintain that the book lacks a systematic or deliberate theology and is written simply to describe human suffering. See, for example, M. Moore, "Human Suffering in *Lamentations*," *Revue Biblique* 90 (1983), pp. 534-555; Berlin, *Lamentations*, pp. 17-18; C. Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 76-81. Other scholars, however, argue for an existing theology in the book, though it may be woven subtly in the text; see, for example, Gottwald, *Lamentations*; B. Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations in Studia Theologica Lundensia* 21 (Gleerup: Lund, 1963), 214-239.

the disastrous events. At its center (*Eikha* 3:21-39), the book offers its sole developed reflection upon God:¹² His essence, His ongoing graciousness, and His fidelity. This pivotal midpoint also illustrates the manner in which humans maintain a deep core of faith in God's enduring goodness, despite the suffering that plagues them.

Nevertheless, for most of the book, the theological grappling offers a more complicated picture of the relationship between God and humans. Israel's sinfulness, guilt, and accountability exist alongside God's unfathomable punishments, His enmity, and His fierce anger. Indictment of God paradoxically emerges along with Israel's humbling admission of guilt. Hope meets despair as God's silence clashes with Israel's abiding faith in His goodness and faithfulness. Jerusalem addresses God directly, expressing various shades of shame, defiance, and hope for reconciliation. The theological clarity that appears at the core of the book (3:21-39) conflicts with the state of tension and uncertainty that swirls around and dominates. The complexity of the portrait alongside the elusive theology necessitates further investigation, which will engage us during the course of our study.

Eikha's Elusive Theology

I will present three approaches to the elusive theology in the book. They are complementary, but not necessarily cohesive; each one charts its own path. The first explanation suggests that the book of *Eikha* simply does not focus on theology, but rather on emotions. The second offers the possibility that the lack of systematic theology is an outgrowth of the complex quest for understanding God's mysterious ways, and the third searches for answers in the literary artistry of the book. During the course of our study, I will refer to all of these approaches in confronting the challenges presented in the book.

A Book of Suffering

The first approach suggests that proffering emotions replaces the aim of resolving the theological problem of human suffering. Rather than a book of theology, *Eikha* is a book of human ordeals.¹³ Instead of offering solutions, the book portrays an emotional experience, suggesting that the raw, human response to suffering is itself a religious affair, one that builds and shapes character.

Eikha's seemingly inconsistent and rapidly changing attitudes toward God may be explained by its emotional tenor. Is God just or not? An intellectual consideration of the matter approaches the question systematically, offering

¹² See also the brief reflection in *Eikha* 5:19-20.

¹³ See, for example, K. O'Conner, "Lamentations," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Abington, 2001), p. 1024: "The book functions as a witness to pain, a testimony of survival, and an artistic transformation of dehumanizing suffering into exquisite literature."

coherent, logical arguments point by point. However, when humans address the same events through an emotional lens, contradictions abound. God is both just and unjust. Humans are simultaneously horrified, abashed, angered, and comforted by God. The ebb and flow of human emotions and the manner in which they summarily shift and change, arousing thoughts and sentiments that collide and contradict, can account for the rapid movements between different perspectives in *Eikha*. To represent the human emotional condition, the text varies and fluctuates, offering a realistic portrait of humans coping with tragedy. *Eikha's* raw conflicting emotions commingle and clash, forming a multifaceted portrait of human suffering.

This can also explain the inconclusive nature of the book. *Eikha* offers little in the way of hope, comfort, or restoration. Emotions do not provide closure; they tend to be cyclical and unpredictable, and often lie dormant until they resurface unexpectedly. It should not surprise us that *Eikha* does not progress in a linear fashion, nor that it does not conclude with a resolution; by their very nature, emotions, especially strong ones, such as those represented in this book, remain fluid and turbulent.

In our next chapter, we will consider two additional approaches to *Eikha's* elusive theology.