

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
\*\*\*\*\*

**EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #08: Biblical Poetry and the Book of *Eikha* (Part II)**

**Wordplay, Repetition, and Sound Patterns**

Biblical poetry is terse, deploying its words laconically, but with careful artistry. *Eikha* deliberately selects its vocabulary, sometimes offering a broad array of synonyms and at other times repeating a word or sound, thereby creating a sense of denseness and repetition.

For example, *Eikha* 2:1-10 employs a diverse assortment of synonyms to describe the destruction of Jerusalem. Co-opting abundant verbs produces a sense of the scope of the destruction, its comprehensiveness, and the myriad blows that Jerusalem receives from every direction.

As an example of repetitive sound, *Eikha* 3:47 produces a verse dense with assonance and alliteration, fraught with the battering recurrence of several consonants and vowels: ***pachad va-pachat haya lanu, ha-sheit ve-hashaver.*** This striking sound repetition seems designed to hammer at the reader's senses, suggesting the unremitting blows that the nation suffers.

Wordplays are an evocative verbal resource, drawing the reader into the act of interpretation. The reader simultaneously registers the primary meaning of the word along with its secondary meaning, thereby constructing another layer of meaning for the poem.

An apt example is the word *mo'ed*, which appears with different meanings in the book of *Eikha*. The word means an appointed time or place and is used in various contexts throughout the *Tanakh*. Often, it refers to a sanctified time (namely, a holiday) or a sanctified place (namely, the Temple).<sup>1</sup> *Eikha* 2:6 refers to the "*mo'ed ve-shabbat*," a conjunction that leaves little doubt that the reference is to hallowed time. In the same verse, the reference to *mo'ed* parallels God's *sukka*, indicating a consecrated place. *Eikha* 1:4 observes the desolation of the once-bustling roads to Jerusalem, "for there is none that comes to the *mo'ed*." The word *mo'ed* here is ambiguous and multivalent, referring both to sacred time

---

<sup>1</sup> For an example of an appointed time that does not appear to be sacred, see *Bereishit* 18:4 or *Samuel* 20:35. For an example of an appointed place that is not sacred, see *Isaiah* 14:31.

(namely, the pilgrimage holidays), and/or to sacred place (namely, the Temple). Nevertheless, in an ironic twist, *Eikha* also uses the word *mo'ed* to refer to a divinely appointed time to destroy Jerusalem and her residents (1:15). The use of the word *mo'ed* to describe Jerusalem's destruction in place of her former celebrations evokes an agonizing contrast between the once hallowed city and its current devastation. Moreover, it indicates that God has turned against His holy city, transforming the appointed day of celebration into an appointed day of destruction. In an explicit acknowledgement of this dreadful reversal, *Eikha* 2:7 describes the enemies' raucous destruction of the Temple as sounding like the "*yom mo'ed*." The crashing noise of the demolition ironically and painfully recalls the joyous sounds of the celebrations of the sacred festivals.<sup>2</sup>

### Speakers, Voice, and Persona

*Eikha* lacks actual characters. Emerging simply as speaking voices, the multiple narrators of *Eikha*'s poetry remain elusive, often leaving the reader struggling to apprehend the actual identity of the speaker. These voices shift and converge, changing from one verse to the next, and at times even in the middle of a verse.

This literary device gives the reader insight into several different perspectives throughout the book. In chapter 1, Jerusalem's evocative first person account (1:11c-22, except 17) supplants the objective description of Jerusalem in the third person (1:1-11b). The first person plural that appears for the first time in *Eikha* 3:40-48 offers a distinctly different point of view than the first person singular. We can also distinguish between different first person singular speakers: the first person singular account of the individual *gever* (in chapter 3) is not necessarily identical to that of the first person account of Jerusalem (e.g. *Eikha* 1:11-16, 18-22), which seems to represent the collective voice of her ill-fated residents.

The myriad voices in *Eikha* call attention to the absence of God's voice, which never appears. Divine silence allows this book to focus exclusively on its portrayal of the human tragedy, and on the manner in which people grapple with suffering. At the same time, God's reticence appears deliberate, indicating His ire and punishment. The absence of communication suggests that God punitively "hides His face," choosing to retreat from contact with His nation (e.g. *Devarim* 31:17-18). Silence communicates God's unmitigated anger, His deliberate decision to withdraw into stony seclusion.

I will offer one example in which the book's conscious switch of speaker aptly conveys Jerusalem's emotional state. The first time that we hear Jerusalem's voice in the book, it breaks through unexpectedly, in the middle of a sentence in which the narrator is drily sketching Jerusalem's impurities, her downward spiral, and her unendurable loneliness (*Eikha* 1:9). Following Jerusalem's impertinent

---

<sup>2</sup> One other usage of the appointed day (*Eikha* 2:22) appears in a context that requires interpretation. I will therefore omit this example until we encounter it in the course of our study of the book.

interruption, in which she begs God to see her anguish, she immediately falls silent, reverting back to her composed posture. Two verses later, Jerusalem again interrupts the narrator's impassive account of her suffering, desperately beseeching God to take note of her. The verse opens with the narrator's description, cut short by Jerusalem's urgent entreaty:

Her entire nation groans, they seek bread; they exchanged their precious delights for food to restore their lives.

"Look, God, and see! For I have become a glutton." (*Eikha* 1:11)

By allowing the speaker to interrupt the narrator mid-verse, the book implies that Jerusalem's despair erupts unbidden and unconstrained, fraught with profound anguish. Jerusalem has reached her breaking point; she cannot continue to maintain her silence as the narrator objectively recounts her tragic story.

We will examine the medium of *Eikha's* different voices throughout our study, both in order to understand the manner in which the different speakers influence the tone and content of the passages, and in order to analyze how the shift from one speaker to another enhances our understanding of the themes and theology of the book.

### ***Alphabetic Acrostic Structure***

The conscious artistry of the book is perhaps most evident in the alphabetic acrostics of its first four chapters.<sup>3</sup> These acrostics show careful and deliberate assembly. Each verse opens with a subsequent letter of the alphabet.<sup>4</sup> Why adhere to such a formalistic construction? Presumably, this design cramps the free style and creativity of the poet. Why, then, are alphabetic acrostics common features of biblical poetry?<sup>5</sup>

This structure may simply aid in memory, an especially useful device for remembering liturgical compositions in an era in which not everyone owned a prayer book.<sup>6</sup> This approach regards the structure as an external device, unrelated to the meaning of the poems.

Alphabetic acrostics may have a literary function as well. Suitable for maintaining order and compactness, this structure ensures that the poet's grief does not spill

---

<sup>3</sup> Although chapter 5 does not conform to the acrostic structure, it does have twenty-two verses, which appears to be a deliberate allusion to an acrostic structure. Alternatively, it may simply represent a desire to maintain a consistent structural design.

<sup>4</sup> Many acrostic structures contain anomalies. In our book, chapters 2, 3, and 4 reverse the order of the *ayin* and the *peh*. We will discuss this later in our study.

<sup>5</sup> See *Tehillim* 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; *Mishlei* 31; *Nahum* 1.

<sup>6</sup> This seems to be the intention of the following *midrash* (*Lekach Tov Eikha* 1:1): "Why are the laments said in an alphabetic [structure]? So that they should be easily chanted by the mourners."

over and become unwieldy. By using an acrostic structure, the poet maintains control, in spite of the flood of emotions that accompanies his account.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, some scholars suggest that the purpose of the acrostic structure is to convey the idea that in spite of the emotional tone and subject, *Eikha* is a rational, meticulous reflection on the terrible events.<sup>8</sup> This negates the approach of many scholars who maintain that the *Eikha* expresses horror, suffering, and anger, but not analytic, intellectual deliberation. As a literary device, the alphabetic design can also function to bind together the various ideas of the chapter. It provides a structural frame for the emotional account, which by its nature is scattered, turbulent, and frenzied.<sup>9</sup> This allows for the possibility of an orderly account on the backdrop of a world that has splintered and is lying in anguished disarray.

Significantly, the alphabetic structure appears in four consecutive chapters, creating a pattern that involves recurring opening and closure. The alphabetic structure conveys inevitable completion, repeatedly guiding the reader toward an inexorable, anti-climactic end. These alphabetic chapters sketch a portrait of repetitive, irreversible progression; the destruction will conclude only when we reach the conclusion of the alphabet.

Nevertheless, there may be a positive message concealed in this repetitive alphabetic structure; after all, renewal follows every ending, emerging in spite of the hopeless tone that attends the substance of the chapter. Having concluded one melancholic description, which leaves the reader with a sense of hopeless doom, the book appears to reawaken and acquire new energy, launching a new alphabetical sequence, thereby offering a new lease on life.

Acrostics most of all suggest totality, everything from A to Z.<sup>10</sup> Though Jerusalem's all-encompassing suffering is impossible to convey in words, by deploying all twenty-two alphabetic letters, each chapter indicates its intention to employ the full range of linguistic possibilities. The following *midrashim* note that *Eikha's* alphabetic structure expresses totality (although they focus on the totality of Israel's sins, rather than on its grief):

---

<sup>7</sup> N. K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London: SCM Press, 1954), p. 31, calls this the "judicious economy" of the book.

<sup>8</sup> E. Assis, "The Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations," *CBQ* 69, 4 (2007), pp. 717-718, maintains that the acrostic structure is employed in order to convey the idea that *Eikha* is a book of rational reflection rather than an outpouring of unstructured emotions. See also W. F. Adeney, *Songs of Solomon and the Lamentations of Jeremiah* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895), pp. 66-67, and Driver, *Introduction*, 459; Gottwald, *Lamentations*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 27; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> One can discern this purpose in many compositions that employ alphabetic acrostics. For example, *Tehillim* 145 expresses the comprehensive praise of God, while the alphabetic *vidui* (confession) of Yom Kippur expresses the totality of sinfulness.

Why was [the book of *Lamentations*] written in alphabets? [R. Eliezer said:] Because Israel transgressed all of the Torah completely. (*Eikha Zuta* 1:1)

Why are the laments said in alphabets? ... Another explanation: Why was Israel penalized with an alphabetic? They sinned from *aleph* to *tav* [i.e., A to Z] so they were punished from *aleph* to *tav*. (*Pesikta Zutrata* (*Lekach Tov*), *Eikha* 1:1).

The chapters thus express Jerusalem's anguish in a manner that suggests comprehensiveness, mustering in a constricted space all the pain that the alphabet can encompass.

Deviations from the alphabetic acrostic draw the reader's attention, generating their own interpretive discussion. Why does the third chapter contain a triple alphabetic acrostic? Why does chapter 5 lack any alphabetic structure, but retain the twenty-two verse total? Why is the customary order of the letters *peh* and *ayin* switched in chapters 2, 3, and 4, but retained in the first chapter?<sup>11</sup> For the moment, we will leave these questions aside. We will address them as they arise during the course of this study.

### Chiastic Structure

A chiastic structure is a literary device that involves a crosswise arrangement of concepts or words, which are repeated in reverse order, creating a ring structure (AB B'A').<sup>12</sup> This form of writing was common throughout the literature of the ancient Near East.<sup>13</sup> The Bible utilizes chiastic structures (in both prose and poetry) for a variety of purposes. They can be used, for example, to accentuate the concept of reward and punishment (e.g. *Bereishit* 9:6), or simply to draw attention to parallels in the composition. Sometimes the structure is concentric, in which the parallel sections revolve around a central axis that has no corresponding passage (A B C B' A'). This tends to highlight the central axis, which contains the vital idea of the composition.<sup>14</sup>

It may be possible to discern an internal chiastic structure in chapters 1 and 2 of

---

<sup>11</sup> Intriguingly, in the Qumran manuscript that contains the first chapter of *Lamentations* (4QLam), the *peh* precedes the *ayin*, conforming to the three other alphabetic chapters.

<sup>12</sup> Many articles have been written about this structure. See, e.g., Shimon Bar-Efrat, "Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980), pp. 154–73; Yehuda Raday, "Al Ha-Kiasm Be-Sippur Ha-Mikra'i," *Beit Mikra* (1964), pp. 48–72 [Hebrew].

<sup>13</sup> See John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberh Verlag, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> Several scholars maintain that this is the sole purpose of the structure. See e.g. Raday, *Ha-Kiasm*, p. 51; D. N. Freedman, "Preface," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, p. 7. I believe there is also significance to the parallel passages that form the concentric circles around the center.

*Eikha*, in which the *aleph* letter matches the *tav* (*a"t*) and the *bet* corresponds to the *shin* (*b"sh*), creating an "*a"t – b"ash*" pattern.<sup>15</sup> In this scheme, the chapter appears as concentric circles that progress in increasingly narrower circles until the central meeting point of the chapter, which contains its key idea. This structure provides a sense of cyclical rotation, representing an interminable calamity, a tale of destruction that has no exit. Jerusalem is as inconsolable at the end of the chapter as she is in the beginning,<sup>16</sup> as troubled at the end as she is in the beginning.<sup>17</sup>

The chapter's chiasmic structure also focuses our attention at its inner core, the *kaf* and *lamed* verses (11 and 12), which contains an inner chiasmic linguistic pattern:

ראה...והביטה  
הביטו וראו

Look... see  
See and look

The chiasm that lies at the focal point of this chiasmic chapter casts a spotlight upon its central idea: Jerusalem's loneliness. Having opened with Jerusalem's lonesome state, at the chapter's heart, Jerusalem desperately yearns for someone, *anyone*, to look her way. Initially, she turns to God ("Look, God, and see!" – 1:11), beseeching Him to look her way and alleviate her isolation. However, God remains elusive, presumably a consequence of His anger and "hidden face" (*Devarim* 31:16-18). Receiving no response, Jerusalem turns to the detached passersby, to those indifferent people who chance by as Jerusalem writhes in the agony of her solitary state. Grabbing hold of these pedestrians, Jerusalem's pleas for attention ("See and look!" – 1:12) ring with plaintive and pitiful tones.

The overall structure of *Eikha* also appears to be structured chiasmically. In this schema, chapters 1 and 5 correspond linguistically and thematically. Chapters 2 and 4 likewise contain numerous linguistic parallels and ideas unique to these two chapters. I have already noted that these similarities point to a crucial theological correspondence between the chapters, which underscores the essential goal of the book. This broad chiasmic pattern, moreover, highlights chapter 3, which stands at the pivotal center of the book, directing our attention to the theology and faith that lies as its core. At the book's center, *Eikha* grapples with God's role in human suffering, providing a remarkable depiction of the deep core of human resilience, faith, and fidelity to God.

---

<sup>15</sup> If chapters 3, 4, and 5 in fact lack a chiasmic structure, this too requires an explanation. We will raise this question during the course of our study.

<sup>16</sup> Note the phrase *ein la menachem*, which appears in the second verse (the *bet* letter), and the similar phrase, *ein menachem li*, in the corresponding *shin* letter (v. 21).

<sup>17</sup> Note the corresponding root *tzar* in verses 3 and 20 (the letters *gimmel* and *kaf*).

For the moment, we will leave this topic undeveloped. However, we will continue to examine this idea as we progress through the book. At the conclusion of our study, we will collate the ideas presented throughout, devoting a separate chapter to understanding the manner in which the chiastic structure of the book conveys its most fundamental theological ideas.

### **Challenges of Poetry: Methodology**

Writing about biblical poetry entails a unique set of challenges, especially when composed for an English speaking audience. Interpreting any text in translation cannot adequately represent the original. Moreover, the nuances and associations of the Hebrew language and the historical context of the book tend to be obscured when writing in English. In addition, biblical poetry tends to be particularly elliptical and multivalent, and sentences bear multiple interpretations. Biblical poetry typically requires great effort to comprehend. Its language inclines to denseness, its grammatical tenses alternate fluidly, and its sentences are often terse, lacking prepositions and explanatory phrases.<sup>18</sup> Engaging in linguistic discussions can become unwieldy and tiresome, and can thus dissuade the reader from apprehending the loftier goals of the book. In this commentary, I will not present all the possibilities for interpreting each sentence. Unless there is a pressing reason to introduce the various possibilities, or if I feel that the text is particularly ambiguous, I will choose the reading that I feel is best, based on interpretive and philological considerations. My goal is to introduce the reader to the themes and ideas of the book, as well as the manner in which *Eikha* deploys literary artistry to evoke theological meaning. It is my hope that my selective interpretive methodology will succeed in presenting this book in its magnificent profundity and sublimity.

---

<sup>18</sup> As Berlin, *Reading*, p. 2098, points out, biblical poetry typically and frequently omits the definite article, the accusative marker, *et*, and the relative pronoun, *asher*. Moreover, the style of biblical poetry is paratactic, in which connectives between lines are absent or contain a conjunction (i.e. a *vav*) that can have several contradictory meanings (such as “and,” “or,” “but”). These omissions render biblical poetry particularly opaque and subject to multiple interpretations.