

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah
for all who require healing, comfort and peace –
those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.
May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

**Shiur #02: Historical Introduction:
Part I – The Exile of the Northern Kingdom**

History and the *Tanakh*

The *Tanakh* is not a history book, nor is it a book of mythologies; its purpose is theological, moral, and didactic, recounting the history of the relationship between God and humans. There is no attempt to offer a complete historical account,¹ nor is there any notion of objectivity.² Instead, the *Tanakh* constructs partial narratives, designed to illustrate a particular theological understanding of historical events for an edifying purpose.

Nevertheless, the narrative events recorded in the *Tanakh* take place within a geographical and historical context. The primary setting of the *Tanakh* is Israel and its northern and southern neighbors, the great river valleys of Mesopotamia and Egypt. These fertile valleys were home to great civilizations and shifting patterns of empires and alliances, which often collided with Israel.

¹ Many examples indicate this. Consider, for example, the book of *Joshua's* account of the conquest of the land, which depicts only four wars, although it lists thirty-one kings killed. *Joshua* does not claim that the war stories represent the comprehensive account of the conquest. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the topic fully, it appears that these four wars are arranged as a literary construct that offers a theological approach to the conquest of the land. Another example of the ahistorical nature of the biblical account may be observed in the story of Ahab, whose building achievements, though archeologically impressive, are concentrated into just one verse in the biblical account (*I Kings* 22:39). Ahab's lengthy story focuses instead on his sins and on Elijah's censure and attempts to induce his repentance.

² The *Tanakh* recounts its historical narratives from a theological perspective. Righteous kings are likely to prosper, while evil kings receive their just desserts. Exceptions to this generally elicit explanations (see e.g. the explanation of Jeroboam's unlikely success in *II Kings* 14:25-27, or the attempt to explain Josiah's death in *II Kings* 23:25-27).

Archeology has thus far produced little evidence to corroborate early biblical history. Textual evidence outside of the *Tanakh* regarding the events in *Bereishit* and Israel's time in Egypt is largely peripheral in nature and heavily dependent upon interpretation.³ It is only beginning in the mid-ninth century BCE (during the period of Omri) that Assyrian texts begin to relate directly to biblical characters and events. I will not list these texts here, but I will instead refer to them as they become relevant to our historical examination.

History and the Book of *Eikha*

Eikha is by no means a historical account of events, as it lacks narrative, dates, or identified persons. It does not attempt to relate a prose account of Jerusalem's fall or Babylon's conquest and cruelty. Nevertheless, to contextualize the book and understand its surface meaning, we must address its historical background. *Eikha*, after all, commemorates the climactic calamity of the *Tanakh*: the destruction of the First Temple and Jerusalem.

Beginning with Abraham's initial journey to the land, Israel's national goals concentrated on maintaining national autonomy in the Land of Israel. Babylon's conquest of Jerusalem and the exile of its population in 586 BCE marks both an end and a turning point for biblical history. Political, religious, economic, and social repercussions follow these catastrophic events, representing the backdrop to the lamentations that comprise the book.

I will briefly review the major historical events, as recorded both in the *Tanakh* and in external sources, pausing to examine three events that I believe most deeply impact upon Judah, Jerusalem, and the book of *Eikha*. The events that I will consider are the exile of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE,⁴ Sennacherib's failed military campaign to conquer Jerusalem in 701 BCE, and King Josiah's shocking death in 609 BCE. Each of these events impacts significantly upon biblical history and the Judean kingdom and in some way constitutes the theological backdrop of the book of *Eikha*.

The Assyrian Empire and the Exile of the Northern Kingdom

Assyria had been a significant Mesopotamian kingdom from at least the third millennium BCE, its power rising and falling alongside the fluctuating power patterns of the surrounding nations. During the Neo-Assyrian period (900-600 BCE), with which we are concerned, the Assyrians constructed the largest and

³ While some archeologists point to certain evidence that appear to contradict some of the details of biblical narratives, others argue that the stories in *Bereishit* accurately reflect the time-period of the Middle Bronze Age. In his book, *Excavating the Bible: New Archaeological Evidence for the Historical Reliability of Scripture* (Eshel Books, 2012), Y. Meitlis argues that there is no contradiction between the biblical narratives and archeological finds.

⁴ *Chazal* refer to this as the exile of the ten tribes (e.g. *Megilla* 14b; *Sanhedrin* 110b).

most powerful empire ever known in the region. During this period, Assyria swept through the Ancient Near East, conquering cities, and, by replacing the indigenous kings with Assyrian governors, they absorbed the conquered territories into their empire as provinces. Often, the Assyrians relocated large portions of the population to other regions, thereby preventing revolt. The Assyrian campaign eventually united the entire region into one enormous empire.

The biblical account first mentions the Neo-Assyrian empire during the reign of Tiglath Pileser III (745-727 BCE), referred to also as Pul (*II Kings* 15:19). His military success affected both the kings of Israel⁵ and Judah: Menachem ben Gadi of Israel offered tribute to keep him at bay (*II Kings* 15:19-20), while Ahaz of Judah bribed him to keep Judah's other enemies (Israel and Aram) at bay (*II Kings* 16:7-8). Nevertheless, Tiglath Pileser eventually dismantled large portions of the Israelite kingdom, greedily taking parts of the Galilee (*II Kings* 15:29) and Transjordan (*I Chron.* 5:26). The Judean kingdom also regarded the voracious Assyrians as an abiding threat, in spite of their alliance and substantial bribe, and Ahaz took precautions in case the Assyrians attacked (*II Kings* 16:17-18).⁶ Tiglath Pileser's son, Shalmaneser V (reigned 727-722 BCE), eventually besieged Israel's capital city, Samaria, in response to Hosea's rebellion. After three years, Assyria conquered Samaria, deported its inhabitants, and repopulated the city with captives from the northern lands (*II Kings* 17:4-6).

The defeat and exile of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE was a devastating and unprecedented event. Since the conquest of Joshua, even if the nation had suffered defeats and setbacks, Israel had remained firmly rooted in their land. The mass exile from the Promised Land raised theological questions as well as practical ones. How could the nation of Israel continue to maintain its national identity once a large percentage of its population had been scattered? Why did God allow the enemy to expel a significant part of His nation from the land that He gave them? Would they return to their land and reassume hegemony? Had God rejected the Israelite kingdom and selected the Judean kingdom as His chosen nation? Could this type of disaster befall the Judean kingdom, which contained the Temple in its midst? Assyria's particular ruthlessness produced an additional theological quandary: Is God just? If so, why do the wicked prosper?

⁵ While I will often use the term Israel to refer to the Northern Kingdom (and Judah to refer to the southern kingdom), I will also use the term in its more colloquial sense, to refer to the entire nation of Israel. Though this is a bit confusing, I have taken pains to distinguish between these usages throughout this study.

⁶ See also *II Chron.* 28:20-21, which asserts that Tiglath Pileser harmed Ahaz the king of Judah. It remains unclear as to whether this alludes to a direct assault (which seems unlikely), to the Assyrian betrayal of the alliance, or to the unwitting religious harm that ensued as a result of Ahaz's enthusiasm for the Assyrians.

How is it possible that the evil Assyrians continued to thrive, even though they oppressed others so cruelly?⁷

In an upcoming chapter, we will grapple with the manner in which *Eikha* treats these troubling theological questions within the context of its own disaster. For now, we will simply note one point of certainty. Prophets provided ample warning for the impending disaster, informing the Northern Kingdom repeatedly and in advance that God would exile them if they continued to sin. After the fact, the *Tanakh* affirms that Israel's sins functioned as the primary catalyst for the cataclysmic events. *II Kings* 17:7-23 enumerates the sins of the Northern Kingdom at great length, cataloging the grave transgressions that precipitated Israel's devastating punishment.

Judah's Response

Judah's response to the exile of her northern brethren is largely obscure. Busy with her own attempt to deflect and survive the Assyrian invasion into Judah, Judah seems to have had little time to reflect on the theological impact of these events upon her. The *Tanakh* adduces Israel's calamity to warn Judah of her own vulnerability and sinfulness. In the midst of describing the theological reason for Israel's exile, the chapter in *II Kings* pauses to reflect on Judah's survival:

And God was greatly wrathful at Israel, and He removed them from Him. No one remains, except only the tribe of Judah. Judah also did not observe the commandments of God their God, and they went in the ways of Israel, doing that which they did. (*II Kings* 17:18-19)

Woven seamlessly into a lengthy explanation of Israel's exile, the assertion that Judah's rejection of God's commandments echoes and imitates Israel's apostasy rings ominously with threatening undertones.⁸ If God exiled one part of His nation due to their sins, then why should a sinful Judah feel immune to this punishment?⁹

Similarly, the prophet Micah castigates both Israel and Judah for their sins, proclaiming that God intends to wreak judgment upon them (*Micah* 1:2-5). Describing God's annihilation of Samaria (*Micah* 1:6-9), Micah then portrays the Assyrian destruction of much of Judah, up to, but not including, Jerusalem (*Micah* 1:9-15, especially verses 9 and 12). In accordance with Micah's description, the

⁷ Habakkuk's poignant lament over the success of the evildoers, along with his harsh accusation against God, seems to follow the period of successive Assyrian victories, generating Habakkuk's theological outrage.

⁸ See also *II Kings* 17:13, which describes prophets warning both Israel and Judah.

⁹ The answer, as we shall see, is that they believe that the Temple's presence offered them divine immunity, irrespective of the sins committed in the holy city.

Assyrian forces did indeed halt at the gates of Jerusalem, failing to penetrate its fortifications (in 701 BCE). Nevertheless, Micah makes it plain that it was not because of her righteousness that God spared Judah. Flinging accusations of sinfulness at Judah, Micah asserts that the sins of Israel prevailed within Judean cities as well:

Harness your chariots to your horses, inhabitants of Lachish!¹⁰ She is the beginning of sin for Bat Zion. For in you the transgressions of Israel have been found. (*Micah* 1:13)

Moreover, Micah warns that God will not spare Jerusalem if she continues to sin. Following a lengthy description of Judah's transgressions, Micah utters a devastating (and unprecedented) prophecy.¹¹ In language that recalls the description of the ruins of Samaria in *Micah* 1:5, Micah foretells the impending devastation of Jerusalem, who will surely fall victim, like Samaria, to God's wrath over her sins.¹²

Whether Judah took Israel's punishment to heart remains unclear. Jeremiah suggests that Hezekiah and Judah heeded Micah's warning and repented, precipitating God's forgiveness and the reprieve of God's decree against Jerusalem:¹³

Micah the Morashite who prophesied in the days of Hezekiah the king of Judah said to all of the nation in Judah, "So says God: Zion will be ploughed up like a field and Jerusalem will be in ruins and the Temple Mount will be like a shrine in a forest." Did Hezekiah the king of Judah and all of the Judeans kill him? Did they not fear God and pray to God and God regretted the evil that He had planned to do to them! (*Jeremiah* 26:18-19)

¹⁰ Lachish is a city in Judah. Biblical exegetes explain that the sins of the Northern Kingdom first penetrated Lachish. From there they spread to the capital of Judah, Zion. See e.g. Ibn Ezra and Radak, *Micah* 1:13.

¹¹ Although it is an unprecedented prophecy, immediately following the construction of the Temple, God informed Shelomo that if the nation (and kings) sin, He would destroy the Temple (*I Kings* 9:6-9).

¹² *Micah* 6:9-16 compares "the city's" sins to those of Omri and Ahab, two of Israel's most sinful kings. While it is unclear whether he is describing the city of Samaria or Jerusalem (see Radak, *Micah* 6:9), some exegetes assume that Micah is describing Jerusalem (e.g. Metzudat David, *Micah* 6:9.) If so, the allusion to the sins of Israelite kings suggests the correlation between Judah's and Israel's crime, which appears to prepare the path to their parallel punishments.

¹³ The chronology of these events remains unclear and subject to interpretation. According to the source in *Jeremiah* 26:19, it seems that Micah's prophecy (3:12) preceded the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem, while the book of *Micah* suggests that his prophecy of devastation followed that event (see *Micah* 1:9, 12 and 3:11-12).

Nevertheless, Judah's repentance was brief, and both Jeremiah (e.g. *Jeremiah* 3:6-10) and Ezekiel (e.g. *Ezekiel* 23:1-49) castigate Judah for failing to internalize Israel's punishment. The Judeans believed that the Israelite exile had no bearing on her own future. After all, the Temple resided in Judah's midst, distinguishing the consecrated southern kingdom from the northern one.¹⁴ Moreover, Judeans seem to have regard the Northern Kingdom as especially sinful, while erroneously assuming that God saved Jerusalem from the Assyrian superpower due to their own righteousness. In the opinion of some Judeans, the events established the exclusive legitimacy of the Judean kingdom as the true bearer of Israelite tradition. Ezekiel disapprovingly cites echoes of this attitude, prevalent among the inhabitants of Jerusalem:¹⁵

Your brothers, your brothers... and all of the totality of the house of Israel, those to whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, "**They** have distanced themselves from God and to **us** the land has been given as a heritage." (*Ezekiel* 11:15)

The words of the arrogant Jerusalemites elucidate their theological understanding of exile. Sins cause exile, signifying divine rejection, which strips the exiles of their inheritance. According to the Jerusalemites, God's dismissal of the north contained an implied selection: God maintained the southern kingdom, its king, Temple, and capital city, indicating their chosen status.

The fact that the Judeans considered themselves immune to this sort of punishment only compounded the scope of the disaster following the exile of the southern kingdom. Consumed by bewilderment and horror, the Judean community was forced to contend with the inconceivable exile of Jerusalem and Judah alongside the destruction of God's Temple in 586 BCE. Moreover, the northern tribes remained mostly in exile, and never reacquired autonomy in their former land, suggesting the difficulty of restoration and return. The frightening notion that their fate might be similar to that of the northern tribes deepened Judean dismay and confusion. Is Israel condemned to oblivion in exile? Has God rejected the entire nation?

Thus, the exile of the Northern Kingdom reverberated in the background of the southern kingdom's disaster in 586 BCE. Israel's exile should have positively influenced Judah, guiding them to modify their behavior. They did not, and the exile of the Judeans ensued, leaving them to fear that the consequences of their

¹⁴ The attitude toward the Temple increases their confidence and complacency, as we will see.

¹⁵ While the verse does not clarify specifically to whom the inhabitants of Judah referred, Rashi suggests that the inhabitants of Jerusalem assumed this about all members of the nation of Israel previously exiled from the land, including the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE and those exiled from Jerusalem during the exile of Jehoaichin in 597 BCE.

exile would be similar to that of their northern brethren, a permanent and devastating loss.