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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #21: *Eikha*: Chapter 2**

**Introduction: A Turbulent City**

Chapter 2 opens by offering the reader eyewitness access to the obliteration of the city. Raucous forces hammer Jerusalem, methodically demolishing her magnificent buildings and secure infrastructure. Despite its violence, the first part of the chapter maintains order; this is not a chaotic account but a systematic one. The alphabetic arrangement parallels the carefully designed execution of God’s wrath.

Synonyms play a critical role in painting the portrait of a city battered. Verbs pour forth, creating a rhythmic tale of unrelenting destruction. Each sentence presents God administering a different sort of blow: God hurls and swallows, destroys and violates, chops and consumes, poises His bow and kills, wrecks and spurns. God strikes at each of Jerusalem’s structures: her fortresses, buildings, palaces, and protective barriers. Divine wrath does not spare even His own house. The significance of this fact is indicated by the various appellations accorded to the Temple in this chapter, conveying its many facets and functions: “glory of Israel,” “footstool of God;” “protective booth;” “meeting place;” “altar of sacrificial service;” “sacred space;” “house of God.”

This chapter unambiguously identifies the perpetrator of the destruction; it is God Who rampages against the city. Synonyms abound to describe God’s anger: He unleashes divine fury, wrath, rage, and ire (*apo, chari af, chamato, za’am*) upon His sacred city. God’s wrath frames the chapter,[[1]](#footnote-1) a consuming fire that incinerates its environs. Yet, the chapter does not describe a capricious fit of divine anger. God lays careful plans to destroy Zion’s walls; spreading out a measuring line (verse 8), God proceeds to obliterate the city. The narrator’s depiction of God’s fury seems to reflect the human anger that simmers latent, but unabated, throughout the presentation of the city’s destruction. Jerusalem’s grievous outrage finally explodes at the conclusion of the chapter, when Jerusalem turns against God in direct accusation (verses 20-22).

The chapter’s presentation of God as the “enemy” is both rare and deeply unsettling.[[2]](#footnote-2) Initially, the narrator seems reluctant to designate God in this harsh light, presenting God as withdrawing His right arm to allow the enemy unfettered access to destroy Jerusalem (verse 3). Despite its terrifying implication, God’s cooperative role in the city’s destruction apparently inadequately conveys the full force of His involvement. In the next verse (verse 4), God transforms into the veritable enemy, positioning His potent right arm to strike. This is not a comfortable portrait of God. *Eikha* offers the reader an unexpected thunderbolt, an insight into the trauma and horror of humans who confront divine betrayal.

In chapter 2, destruction often focuses on the leadership, rather than on the general populace. Having failed in their task to guide the nation, kings, officers, prophets, and priests seem to bear the brunt of God’s anger (verses 2, 6, 9).[[3]](#footnote-3) The resultant dearth of religious and political leadership produces confusion. Order disappears along with a sense of security; God’s instructions subside, and guidance remains elusive (verse 9).

The focus on the leaders somewhat exonerates the general populace, alleviating their personal responsibility for the calamity. Without effective supervision, how can anyone expect satisfactory religious performance from the laypeople? This chapter considers the possibility that Judah suffers an undeserved fate, an implication that also emerges from other themes in the chapter. The dominant image of chapter 2 is the suffering and death of Jerusalem’s young children, an unfathomable tragedy that proscribes any suggestion of culpability. The tidy reconciliation of chapter 1, which concludes with Jerusalem’s confident proclamation of God’s unquestionable righteousness (1:18), breaks down when we encounter the miserable, guiltless children.

In this chapter, God’s wrath is not balanced by evoking Israel’s sinfulness, which appears nowhere in the first part of the chapter (and is significantly muted in the second half). Jerusalem herself never admits sinfulness. Lacking explanation or context for God’s anger, the chapter maintains a tone of incomprehension. Nothing could properly explain the intensity and brutality that characterizes the assault on Jerusalem. God’s merciless treatment remains unrelieved by the assertion of theological culpability. The sins of chapter 1 have faded; this chapter considers only the trauma of the assault. In chapter 2, Jerusalem never reaches out to reconcile with God, remaining instead in her posture of outrage, unabashed in her defiance and anger.

**Structure**

Chapter 2 is substantially similar to the previous one. Both chapters employ the identical opening word, *eikha*, signifying a lamentation, a rhetorical question that expresses incomprehension. Both chapters consist of verses that comprise three sentences.[[4]](#footnote-4) Like chapter 1, chapter 2 is written in an acrostic; each subsequent verse begins with the successive letter of the alphabet.[[5]](#footnote-5)

At first glance, the overall structure of the chapter likewise appears similar. The first half of chapter 2 (verses 1-10) relates its account of Jerusalem in an objective, third-person narration. Verse 11 shifts into the first person, with a subjective report of Jerusalem’s suffering, accompanied by a meaningful change in the tenor of the account.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, unlike chapter 1 (1:9, 11), no interruption occurs during the course of the narrator’s report; Jerusalem does not offer her version until the narrator has finished. This suggests a neater tale, in which the chapter allots ample and equal time to each side to offer his account of the catastrophe.

Nevertheless, it is not quite so simple. Jerusalem falls silent after just two brief, but evocative verses (11-12). These verses offer a rapid shift of horror-filled images; the children, faint from starvation, lurch and weave, beg for a final morsel, lie faint, and finally (mercifully?) expire in their mother’s bosoms. Following this agonizing description, Jerusalem gamely concludes her grim report. What more can one say?

Without recourse to Jerusalem’s voice, verses 13-19 return to the narrator, who steps in to fill the void created by the city’s speechlessness. The narrator attempts different strategies to persuade Jerusalem to resume her speech. Initially offering empathy, the narrator presumes to share the burden of the city’s unbearable grief (verse 13). Following that, the narrator endeavors to ease Jerusalem’s guilt (verse 14). Finally, the narrator adopts a more aggressive tactic, tendering a portrait of the different external reactions to her tragedy (both empathetic and hostile), thereby prodding Jerusalem to endeavor to change her fortune (verses 15 and 16). The narrator’s persistent efforts are to no avail; the city remains stubbornly silent. Perhaps Jerusalem’s sobs choke her, preventing her from speech. Jerusalem may have given in to despair. Possibly, she defiantly refuses to plead her case before God. Whatever the case, Jerusalem remains mute and inaccessible, effectively paralyzed without tears and without words.

The narrator, however, refuses to yield. In a final bid to compel Jerusalem to resume her speech, the narrator evokes the ghastly image of the starving children, expiring on the city’s streets (verse 19). This, the very same image that caused Jerusalem’s silence, proves effective; Jerusalem’s anger finally explodes, and she issues an accusation in a second person invective against God that resonates shockingly: “Look God, and see! To whom have You done this? Women have eaten their children, whom they bore and nurtured! Priests and prophets have been killed in God’s sanctuary! ... You murdered on the day of Your anger! You slaughtered and You did not pity!” (*Eikha* 2:20-21)

While theologically disturbing, accusation against God does not necessarily constitute heresy in the Bible. It can actually affirm human belief in a just and compassionate God, insisting that God adhere to His righteousness. Avraham’s words to God are instructive, as he searches for a way to persuade God not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Amorrah (*Bereishit* 18:25): “Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” This audacious question illustrates the Bible’s willingness to allow humans to interact boldly with God, especially when human impudence is predicated on deep-rooted belief in God’s goodness. Jerusalem’s relationship with God empowers her; when Jerusalem emerges from the numb speechlessness that overwhelmed her in verses 13-19, she remonstrates with God, reminding the reader of the meaningful relationship that exists between them. In the final analysis, Jerusalem’s indictment of God’s actions illustrates how deeply she intertwines her own fate with God’s attentions. The city’s shock and outrage emerges from an unwavering belief in a virtuous God.

1. See the reference to the day of God’s anger in 2:1 and again in 2:21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The portrayal of God as enemy is exceedingly rare in the Bible. See *Isaiah* 63:10 and *Job* 16:9, where Job calls God “my adversary.” In several passages (e.g. *Job* 13:24; 19:11; 33:10), Job reverses this idea, asking why God considers *him* an enemy of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. God measures the leaders by a different standard, having tasked them with the burden of guiding the nation toward proper religious observance. The failure of the leaders stands apart from that of the nation and prophets often treat it separately from the deficiencies of the general society. See e.g. *Jeremiah* 23; *Ezekiel* 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The three-sentence verse is unique to chapters 1 and 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In chapter 2, however, the order of the *ayin* and the *peh* is reversed. We will examine this in an appendix to our chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Scholars differ widely in their understanding of the identity of the different speakers in the chapter. Some regard all of 2:1-19 as a monologue by the narrator, who speaks in both third and first person (e.g. Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. 40-48; Dobbs-Allssop, *Lamentations*, pp. 78-79; Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 67). For a range of possible ways to divide the chapter and identify its various speakers, see House, *Lamentations* p. 372-373. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)