

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #03: Historical Introduction, Part II –
Sennacherib's Campaign and the Failed Siege of Jerusalem**

After the exile of the ten tribes in 722 BCE, Assyria's power and expansionist appetite thrived and grew. Shalmaneser V's nephew, Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.), waged several military campaigns, often against vassals who had rebelled and refused to send their monetary tribute. Hezekiah, king of Judah, rebelled against Assyria (*II Kings* 18:14), prompting Sennacherib to demolish much of the Judean kingdom, including its fortified cities (*II Kings* 18:13). The biblical account parallels for the most part Sennacherib's own account, recorded in the Prism of Sennacherib:

I laid siege to forty-six of his [Hezekiah's] strong cities, walled forts, and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered [them] by means of well-stamped earth-ramps and battering-rams brought [thus] near [to the walls] [combined with] the attack by foot soldiers [using] mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out [of them] 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle, and considered [them] booty... His towns, which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Sillibel, king of Gaza. Thus, I reduced his country, but I still increased his tribute... beyond his former tribute to be delivered to me annually.¹

Sennacherib eventually turned his attention to Hezekiah's capital city, Jerusalem. It is a testimony to the importance of this story that three different biblical books record the siege of Jerusalem: *II Kings* 18:17-19:37, *Isaiah* 36-37, and *II Chronicles* 32:1-23. The most striking feature of this episode is its stunning failure. Sennacherib's buoyant and arrogant confidence in his own power reverberates throughout the biblical narratives, and is corroborated by the conceit displayed in his own annals. The Assyrian troops arrived in Jerusalem in great numbers (*II Kings* 18:17) and scornfully dismissed Hezekiah's trust in God's salvation:

¹ J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, reprinted 1973), p. 200.

Did the gods of the nations save each one his land from the hands of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvayim, Hena, and Ivva? Did they [the gods] save Samaria from me? Who, among all of the gods in the lands saved their lands from my hands? Will God save Jerusalem from me? (*II Kings* 18:33-35)

Sennacherib's boasting was well earned, as Assyria had indeed barreled through the ancient Near East, defeating nations with extraordinary success (*II Kings* 18:34-35; 19:11-13). Why indeed should tiny Judea succeed when other, much stronger, nations failed?

Nevertheless, Isaiah issued a confident prophecy to Hezekiah, announcing that Assyria's campaign would fail and Jerusalem would emerge unscathed from the Assyrian assault:

So says God: Do not be afraid of the things that you have heard in which the young men of the king of Assyria mocked me. Behold, I have given him a spirit and he will hear a rumor and return to his land and I will make him fall by sword in his land. (*II Kings* 19:6-7)

Isaiah sent another message to Hezekiah informing him that Assyria would not even successfully launch a battle against Jerusalem:

Therefore, so says God to the king of Assyria: He will not enter this city, nor will he shoot there an arrow, and they shall not walk with the shield in front of them and they shall not pour against it a siege mound. (*II Kings* 19:32)

That same night, according to *II Kings* 19:35, an angel of God struck the camp of Assyria, killing 185,000 troops.² Having neutralized the Assyrian soldiers, Isaiah's prophecy was meticulously fulfilled. According to one account, Sennacherib shame-facedly returned to his land (*II Chronicles* 32:21), where he was assassinated.³

Unsurprisingly, Sennacherib's chronicle does not describe his failure to conquer Jerusalem. Nevertheless, in an unprecedented omission, Sennacherib neglects

² The order of events within the three biblical stories is somewhat inconsistent and does not fully concur with Assyrian annals. I have presented a simplified version of the story, without delving into its details or historical intricacies.

³ While the biblical accounts strongly suggest that Sennacherib's failure to capture Jerusalem led to his assassination, evidence suggests that a temporal connection is lacking and Sennacherib was actually assassinated several years later. Indeed, there is strong evidence that family tensions were present throughout Sennacherib's reign. Sennacherib's name in Akkadian alludes to dead brothers (M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings*, [Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1988], p. 228), thereby implying that he received his throne name after the death of brothers.

to boast of his conquest of Jerusalem, instead exultantly describing his siege of the capital city:

As to Hezekiah, the Judean, he did not submit to my yoke; I laid siege to forty-six of his strong cities... Him I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate.⁴

This miraculous salvation of Jerusalem is certainly grounds for triumphant celebration and thanksgiving to God. Not only does the Bible explicitly describe this event three times, but Isaiah continuously refers to this event throughout his prophecies.⁵ It is also possible that this event is the backdrop for several celebratory chapters in *Tehillim*.⁶ Consider the awe-filled description of Jerusalem's impenetrability and of God's special protection of the city in *Tehillim* 46 and 48:

God is a shelter and a strength for us, His help during troubles is very present... A river with joyful streams is the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the most high. God in her midst shall never waver; God will help [the city] as the day breaks. (*Tehillim* 46:2, 5-6)

Great is God and very praiseworthy in the city of our God, the mountain of His holiness... God in [the city's] palaces became known as a shelter. For the kings joined together to pass through [the city] together. They saw and they were truly amazed, they became frightened and startled... "Just as we heard so we have seen in the city of God, in the city of our God; God shall establish her for eternity!" (*Tehillim* 48:2, 4-6, 9)

These exuberant psalms focus on the triumphant declaration that God's city is inviolable.⁷ Foreign kings are moved to proclaim their belief in God and in the eternity of His city. While we cannot determine the exact episode that motivates the composition of these psalms, Jerusalem's miraculous salvation from Sennacherib's military might is certainly a likely candidate.⁸

⁴ Pritchard, *Ancient Near East*, p. 200.

⁵ This is a defining event for Isaiah. See e.g. Isaiah 10:24-34; 31:4-9.

⁶ Ibn Ezra raises this possibility in *Tehillim* 46:1. According to *Bava Batra* 15a, David is not the sole author of the *Tehillim*. Indeed, just under half of the psalms include David's name in the superscription. While this is not conclusive evidence that David did not write those psalms, many sources suggest various authors for the book. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 4:4 cites Ezra as one of the authors/editors of the book of *Tehillim*, allowing for the possibility that some of the psalms are from the period of Hezekiah. Nevertheless, any attempt to deduce the historical context for the different psalms remains speculative.

⁷ See also *Tehillim* 76.

⁸ For scholars who adopt this position, see e.g. C. A. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1906), p. 402; A. Cohen, *The Psalms* (London: Soncino, 1945), p. 150.

Interestingly, *Chazal* note disapprovingly that Hezekiah never sang a song of thanksgiving. In fact, it is for this reason, maintains a *midrash*, that Hezekiah, who was designated to become the Messiah, did not assume this role.⁹ What is the meaning of this? Was Hezekiah, like so many other kings, guilty of the sin of hubris, of failing to recall the source of his salvation? That is, of course, one possible explanation, but I would like to suggest that Hezekiah had several good reasons not to sing a song of thanksgiving.

First, we should note that although Jerusalem remained intact, the kingdom of Judah had been devastated and reduced to a mere fraction of its former size and power. Isaiah's succinct description offers an incisive depiction of the situation:

Your land is desolate, your cities scorched by fire, your land... is being devoured by foreigners; it is desolate, and overthrown by strangers. The daughter of Zion remains like a hut in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a city besieged. Had not God left us with a small remnant, we would be like Sodom, we would be similar to Amora. (*Isaiah 1:7-9*)

Far from celebrating a national triumph, Hezekiah was contending with a national catastrophe. It seems more appropriate for Hezekiah to be mourning the death, exile, and pillage of most of his kingdom, rather than singing a song of thanksgiving for the salvation of Jerusalem!

However, there was another reason to be wary following this episode.¹⁰ God's miraculous intervention and deliverance of the holy city allowed people to draw an erroneous and ultimately catastrophic conclusion. They inferred from these events that God extends His unconditional protection over the city that houses the holy Temple. After all, they reason, Jerusalem is God's dwelling place; God *needs* it to remain standing, no less than its earthly inhabitants do!

Echoes of this assumption resound in various biblical contexts. Consider, for example, the prophecy of Micah that we previously referenced. Following his scathing critique of Jerusalem's leaders, Micah cites them expressing misplaced confidence in the city's immutability:¹¹

[Jerusalem's] leaders judge with bribery, her priests offer instructions for a price, her prophets offer divination for silver, and

⁹ See *Sanhedrin* 94a.

¹⁰ This may not have motivated Hezekiah's decisions; nevertheless, it is clear that circumspection was warranted with regard to God's miraculous salvation of Jerusalem.

¹¹ Micah prophesied against both Samaria and Judah during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. As noted, it is difficult to date this prophecy with precision. According to *Jeremiah* 26:18, Micah spoke this prophecy during Hezekiah's reign. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that establishes whether Micah uttered this prophecy before or after Jerusalem's deliverance.

on God they rely, saying, "Is not God in our midst? No harm shall come to us!" (*Micah 3:11*)

Micah rages against the egregious sins of Jerusalem's political and religious leaders. Of particular concern was their lack of awareness that there would be any genuine repercussions for their depraved behavior. Their reasoning seems to have been based on their assumption that because Jerusalem contained the Temple, it remained sacrosanct and inviolable. If God dwells in Jerusalem, if He has a personal stake in maintaining the city, then the well-being of the city is not dependent on human deeds. In that case, the prophets were incorrect when they linked Jerusalem's security with the proper behavior of its inhabitants. Micah's next words put the leaders' erroneous assumption to rest:

Therefore, because of you, Tzion will be ploughed up like a field, and Jerusalem will become ruins, and the Temple Mount will become like a shrine in the forest. (*Micah 3:12*)

Indeed, the notion of Jerusalem's sacred immunity would prove to be a flawed hypothesis, with fatal consequences.

A similar ideological clash between Jerusalem's populace and an outraged prophet resonates in Jeremiah's famous prophecy:

So says the God of Israel: Improve your ways and your deeds and I will allow you to dwell in this place. Do not rely upon the false words in which they say, "[It is] God's Sanctuary, God's Sanctuary, God's Sanctuary!" For if you improve your ways and deeds... then I will settle you in this place in the land that I gave to your forefathers forever and until eternity. However, you rely upon those false words to no avail... And now because you have done all of these things, says God, and I spoke to you every morning and you did not listen and I called you and you did not answer, I will [destroy] this house that bears my name and that you rely upon... just as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my presence, just as I cast out your brethren, the seed of Ephraim. (*Jeremiah 7:3-15*)

Inhabitants of Jerusalem deemed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple to be inconceivable from a religious viewpoint. When Jeremiah prophesied of the imminent destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem (*Jeremiah 26:6*), he was seized by the religious establishment (prophets and priests) and by the people, and sentenced to death (*Jeremiah 26:7-11*)! Jeremiah's detractors maintained that his prophecy was blasphemous, untenable, and patently false.

The miraculous salvation of Jerusalem from the Assyrian Empire elicited false confidence in Jerusalem's inviolable status and in God's immutable protection of His city. Jerusalem's populace concluded that God would never destroy His own

dwelling place (the Temple), nor would He demolish the city that He had chosen for His holy sanctuary. Jerusalem's erroneous confidence had disastrous consequences. As we now know, Jeremiah's prophecy was truthful and devastatingly precise. The destruction of Jerusalem, and especially the Temple, produced shock and theological bewilderment. Forced to rethink its own assumptions and creeds of faith, the nation of Israel also needed to contend with the astonishment of outsiders, who believed similarly in Jerusalem's sanctified status.¹²

The extraordinary deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army forms an important historical backdrop to the book of *Eikha*. An episode that began as an inspiring manifestation of God's miraculous intervention to save Jerusalem developed in a catastrophic direction. Drawing the wrong conclusions in the aftermath of this astounding incident, the nation became complacent in their overconfidence in the city's sacred status. A stark contrast to their assumptions and belief, the destruction of Jerusalem left a shocked populace in its wake, their physical and ideological world in tatters.

¹² See e.g. *Tehillim* 48:5-9 and its echoes in *Eikha* 2:15. See also *Eikha* 4:12.