

**EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

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**Shiur #04: Historical Introduction, Part III -  
Josiah's Death**

**The Fall of Assyria and Josiah's Rule**

The reign of Ashurbanipal (669-627 B.C.), the last powerful king of the mighty Assyrian Empire, marked both the pinnacle of the Assyrian Empire's power and the beginning of its decline. Many events contributed to the ultimate unravelling of Assyria. Rebellions, civil wars, shifting alliances, and loss of tributes weakened the Empire, creating a vacuum of power. Various nations, most notably Babylonia, sought to fill that vacuum by establishing their rule in the region. Scholars generally date the final demise of the Assyrian empire to the fall of its capital city, Nineveh, to Babylonia in 612 BCE.

Josiah (640-609 BCE) reigned as king of Judah during the period of Assyria's deterioration and downfall. The waning of the Assyrian Empire spawned a significant power vacuum, which worked to Josiah's advantage. Significantly, biblical accounts describing Josiah's reign focus primarily on his personal religious transformation and the way in which it affected his national policies.<sup>1</sup> By juxtaposing Josiah's piety with his political success, the nation likely concluded that the two were connected. In other words, because of Josiah's extraordinary faithfulness, he achieved extraordinary success. To understand this, let us examine Josiah's life and reign.

Josiah began his reign as king at the age of eight after the assassination of his father Amon, who ruled for just two years. At this stage, it seems certain that Josiah himself was not really in charge; Josiah's advisors likely ruled the kingdom, adhering closely to the policies of Josiah's predecessors, and especially his powerful grandfather, Menasseh. Menasseh ruled for an exceptionally long fifty-five years, and his was a sinful period, in which idolatry became entrenched and bloodshed prevailed. Presumably, the corrupt policies instituted by Menasseh persisted for the first eight years of Josiah's rule.

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<sup>1</sup> See *II Kings 21* and *II Chronicles 34*.

In the eighth year of Josiah's reign, when he was sixteen years old, Josiah began to seek God (*II Chronicles* 34:3). Four years later, in the twelfth year of his reign, when Josiah was a young man of twenty, the young king instituted a nationwide reform. He swept through Jerusalem and Judah, purging the land of idolatry and idolatrous shrines. Yet Josiah's virtuous undertakings did not end there. The young king expanded his campaign outside of the border of Judah, in the area of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel. Josiah boldly advanced northward into the cities of Ephraim, Menasseh, and Naphtali, breaking altars, crushing idols, demolishing incense stands, and eliminating all forms of idolatry (*II Chronicles* 34:6-7).

How, in fact, did Josiah succeed in extending his authority over the Northern Kingdom? As noted, the Assyrian empire conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and subsumed it into its vast kingdom. Josiah's bold northward incursion was only possible due to the waning of Assyrian hegemony. In all likelihood, Josiah launched his campaign after the estimated time of Assurbanipal's death (in approximately 627 BCE, the 13<sup>th</sup> year of Josiah's reign) and the subsequent rapid decline of the Assyrian Empire. Josiah appears to have taken advantage of this situation, staking his claim to the territory of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel. This made Josiah the first king since Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, to exercise control over the area of Solomon's united kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Again, it appears that Josiah's success coincided with his religious reforms, suggesting an intrinsic connection.

Josiah continued to move apace with his religious plans and aspirations. In the eighteenth year of his reign, when he was twenty-six, he collected money for renovations of the Temple. During the course of these renovations, the high priest found a Torah scroll in the Temple (*II Kings* 23:8). The discovery elicited a strong reaction from the young king, who tore his clothes and sent his messengers to Huldah the prophetess for a divine oracle.<sup>3</sup> Confirming that the

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<sup>2</sup> Previously, we observed that the nation of Israel had to contend with the terrible fact that the northern exiles never returned to assume autonomy over their former land. Josiah's dominion over the northern area offered a positive spin on the exile of the Northern Kingdom. The vacuum of power created by their sustained exile allowed the Davidic dynasty to restore control over the entire territory of Israel! The exile of the ten tribes offered a solution to a difficult problem of once again attaining a unified state after the country had split into two kingdoms (albeit at a high cost).

<sup>3</sup> The text never clarifies why the discovery of the Torah elicited such a frightened response. Biblical interpreters offer various explanations. Some suggest that the "discovery" implied that the sinful policies of previous kings (Ahaz or Menasseh) had led to the suppression, neglect, and perhaps even destruction of the Torah (e.g. Radak, *II Kings* 22:8). Reading the Torah for the first time in a long while reminded them that the Torah attempts to prevent the very sins that were so prevalent. This recollection generated both regret and fear of punishment. Alternatively, some suggest that they found the Torah scroll rolled to *Devarim* 28, the section known as the *tokhecha*, which delineates the punishments for protracted sinfulness (see e.g. *Yoma* 52b and *Metzudat*

upcoming events are indeed threatening, Huldah issued a devastating prophecy of doom for Jerusalem (*II Kings* 23:16-17). Nevertheless, Josiah did not give in to despair, nor did he cease his relentless pursuit of piety and reform. Gathering Judeans and Jerusalemites to the Temple, Josiah reaffirmed the covenant between the nation and God (*II Kings* 23:1-3). He then intensified the reform, doubling down on his bid to remove idolatry from the land (*II Kings* 23:4-20). Finally, Josiah gathered the nation together to celebrate Pesach, a mass event intended to reignite the nation's piety and fervor (*II Kings* 23:21-25).

Josiah's piety and enthusiastic fidelity to God places him in the company of the most devoted religious figures in the Bible. His exhilarating reforms and unceasing energy brought about significant results, in both the political and the religious arena. Extending his reign to the Northern Kingdom, Josiah reunited the two kingdoms geographically and subsumed the remnants of the northern tribes under Judean reign.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the exiles appear to have begun to trickle home, suggesting the reversal of God's devastating punishments. The people likely concluded that Josiah was that scion of the Davidic dynasty described by Isaiah (*Isaiah* 11:1-10), whose wisdom and piety would lead to the ingathering of the exiles (*Isaiah* 11:11-12, 16), the cessation of rivalry between the kingdoms (*Isaiah* 11:13), and the restoration of the sole rule of the Davidic king over a united kingdom. The nation might certainly regard Josiah as the Messiah, as the hopes and future of the people rested upon the success of this pious king.

The emotional impact of Josiah's extraordinary rise and success was rivalled only by the disappointment that follows his death. In the thirty-first year of Josiah's reign, he went into battle with Pharaoh Necho, who was on his way to assist the waning Assyrians in battling the rising Babylonian empire. Necho attempted to deflect Josiah from fighting him, maintaining that he had no hostile intentions against Josiah, but simply needed to use the Jezreel Valley as a passageway to get to his destination (*II Chronicles* 35:21). Josiah adamantly refused to allow Necho passage, possibly because he recognized that his newfound hegemony over the northern territory remained precarious.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Josiah may well have assumed that God was with him and would assure him victory in this endeavor (e.g. *Ta'anit* 22b). Despite his piety and good intentions, however, Josiah's rationale proved erroneous. Josiah died in battle with Necho, at the age of thirty-nine.

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David, *II Kings* 22:8). The verse that particularly alarmed the king and his officers was the threat that God would surely exile the king along with his people as punishment for their sins (*Devarim* 28:36).

<sup>4</sup> *II Chronicles* 34:5-6, 9 indicates that at the time of Josiah's reign, some members of the exiled tribes resided in the north of Israel. It is unclear whether they had been there since the exile or whether they are among the exiles who returned during the unravelling of the Assyrian Empire. See *Jeremiah* 3:11-12 and *Megilla* 14b.

<sup>5</sup> See Radak, *II Kings* 23:29.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact that Josiah's death had on the nation. A midrashic name derivation encapsulates the significance of Josiah's death. To answer the question why Josiah (*Yoshiyahu*) received his name, a *midrash* explains as follows:

Because when he died, [the nation of] Israel despaired (*nitya'ashu*) of the kingship and the righteous ones understood that the Temple is irredeemable. (*Batei Midrashot Bet, Bereishit*)

Name etymologies generally endeavor to capture the essence of a person, his primary contribution and accomplishments. Astoundingly, this *midrash* suggests that Josiah's lasting legacy was the terrible despair that abounded following his death.

Responses to Josiah's untimely and unwarranted death reverberate throughout biblical passages, merging and rising in a swell of mixed emotions: despair, anger, and confusion. Initially, the public lamented and mourned in an official display of anguish (*II Chron.* 35:25). Jeremiah's advice to Josiah's son to refrain from excessive mourning (*Jeremiah* 22:10) seems designed to relate to the challenge of recovering emotionally from Josiah's death. Echoes of this anguish may reappear in *Eikha* 4:21:

The breath of our nostrils, anointed of God, was captured in their traps, about whom we said, "Under his shadow, we will live amongst the nations." (*Eikha* 4:21)

According to many exegetes, this anointed of God, upon whom the people pinned their hopes, was Josiah, whose death left the people in a state of terrible bewilderment and despair.<sup>6</sup>

Confusion seems to have trumped grief, as the problem of theodicy overshadowed the experience of mourning. In the aftermath of Josiah's death, several prophets expressed their confusion at God's treatment of the wicked and the righteous.<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah asks why the wicked prosper (*Jeremiah* 12:1-3). Habakkuk questions why evil people triumph over the righteous (*Habakkuk* 1:4, 13). According to some biblical interpreters, several of Isaiah's prophecies also relate to this inexplicable event.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Targum *Eikha* 4:21; *Ta'anit* 22b.

<sup>7</sup> We cannot know for certain when exactly Jeremiah and Habakkuk uttered these prophecies. Both of these prophets prophesied, however, at the time of Josiah's death (Habakkuk prophesied about the arrival of the Chaldeans, which actually took place a mere five years after Josiah's death). Thus, it certainly seems probable and perhaps likely that these prophecies expressing bewilderment at God's workings emerged in the aftermath of Josiah's death.

The righteous person is lost and no man takes it to heart; people of virtue perish and no one understands. Because of evil, the righteous perish. (*Isaiah* 57:1)

Rashi and Radak both interpret this verse within the context of Josiah's unexplained death.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Abravanel interprets the bafflement verbalized in the following verse as a reference to Josiah's death:

And he placed his grave with evildoers... though he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth. (*Isaiah* 53:9)

Though none of these verses explicitly mention Josiah, taken together, these prophetic passages suggest that the prophets struggle with a prevailing perplexity regarding God's ways in the period following Josiah's death.

Nevertheless, alongside this confusion, another response emerges – a muted voice, but one that balances and mitigates the unrelenting current sweeping people toward despair and outrage. Faint echoes of it lie buried in Jeremiah's prophecies, which repeatedly question the genuineness of the nation's repentance during Josiah's reform.<sup>9</sup> If the people deceive Josiah, then perhaps they do not deserve his righteous leadership, and his death is a deserved punishment **for the nation**.

An expression of faith in God's righteous judgements appears in the final chapter of *Zephania*, who prophesies during the reign of Josiah. After describing the sins of Jerusalem and her leaders, Zephania asserts:

**God is righteous** in her midst; He does not commit perversions. Morning after morning He brings His justice to light; it is never lacking. But those who pervert [justice] know no shame. (*Zephania* 3:5)

This assertion of unwavering belief in God's righteousness may represent another way of approaching Josiah's death. In fact, the opening of *Eikha* 1:19 echoes the opening of *Zephania* 3:5, in a statement that some rabbinic sources attribute to Josiah on his deathbed:

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<sup>8</sup> Rashi and Radak both regard this as an explanation of sorts, in which the verse explains that Josiah died prematurely so that he would not see the evil that will befall the people. One could interpret the verse likewise as regarding Josiah, but lacking any resolution.

<sup>9</sup> See *Jeremiah* 3:6-18, especially verse 10 (and Rashi and Radak there). See also *Jeremiah* 4:3 and Radak's explanation; *Jeremiah* 8:4-12.

**God is righteous**, for I have rebelled against His mouth! (*Eikha* 1:19)

Rabbinic sources paint a vivid scenario, in which Josiah weakly mumbles these words as he lies dying from the mortal wounds that he received in battle.<sup>10</sup> This certainty is a stark contrast to the incomprehension that we observed in some prophetic passages. This approach trusts that Josiah's death must be just, maintaining an immutable belief in God's righteousness, even if appearances belie this assumption.

These two contradictory approaches to Josiah's death represent two different ways in which humans contend with an incomprehensible world. *Eikha* strikes a similarly balanced posture in its approach to the problem of theodicy. On the one hand, *Eikha* articulates intense anger at God, spawned by acute awareness of the capriciousness of death, the triumph of evildoers, and the suffering of the innocent. However, *Eikha* will also strike a measured pose, allowing a second approach to emerge from the turmoil, one in which the book concludes that God remains just, even if the events suggest otherwise.

Rabbinic sources suggest that the kernel of the book of *Eikha* begins to emerge in the aftermath of Josiah's death.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, Josiah's death sets in motion the upcoming catastrophe. After Josiah, no righteous king sits on the Davidic throne, and events rapidly spiral out of control. More significantly, Josiah's death marks the beginning of the theological crisis and the first attempts to struggle with the complex questions that arise in the wake of unexplained human suffering.

### **Concluding Historical Events**

A mere twenty-two years after Josiah's death, Babylonia laid siege to Jerusalem. The siege and conquest of Jerusalem lasted a year and a half. This was a period of prolonged starvation for Jerusalem's inhabitants, which concluded with the Babylonian penetration into the city and the conquest of the feeble populace. Babylonia captured King Zedekiah, slaughtered his sons, and then blinded him, bringing the Judean king in chains to Babylon (*II Kings* 25:5-7). The Babylonians violently razed the city and the Temple, destroying Jerusalem and exiling nearly all of her surviving populace.

Biblical history climaxes and crashes at this point. Jerusalem's fall represents the conclusion of the continuous narrative that begins in *Bereishit* and concludes in

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. *Eikha Rabba* 1:53.

<sup>11</sup> *Eikha Rabba* (Vilna) 4:1; Rashi *Eikha* 4:1. As we noted in our introductory chapter, sources associate specific verses with Josiah's death, especially in chapter 4 (but also 1:18).

the book of *Kings*. God's promises to the forefathers seem to expire;<sup>12</sup> God brought their descendants to the Promised Land, and now He expels them from that place, allowing a voracious empire to displace them. Successive deportations disgrace Judah, resulting in a nation devoid of its economic infrastructure as well as its national pride.<sup>13</sup> The Davidic dynasty is broken, Jerusalem is razed, and God's holy Temple is desecrated. The usual means of religious expression disappear; priests no longer function and daily sacrifice is no longer an option. The nation no longer has political independence; deprived of its monarchy and leadership, Judah flails about, wrestling to contend with the tragic circumstances.

We will conclude this historical overview by again noting that *Eikha* is not an account of events, nor is it a historical book. Historical events remain murky, allowing the book to sketch the disaster outside the confines of a factual account or of one historical event. The book evokes the emotional and theological nuances and undertones of this catastrophe, resulting in a work of literary art that is an astonishing and vivid portrayal of the human struggle with God amidst their pain. In the next chapter, we will reflect upon the emotional resonance and theological undercurrents in the book of *Eikha*.

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<sup>12</sup> *Chazal* debate when the merit of the forefathers ceases to function effectively on Israel's behalf. Most opinions concur that it occurs in conjunction with the exile of the Northern Kingdom, likely after *II Kings* 13:23. See *Shabbat* 55a and *Vayikra Rabba* 36:6.

<sup>13</sup> Prior to the exile that followed the conquest of Jerusalem in 586, Babylonia had laid siege to Jerusalem in 597 (during the reign of Jehoakhin). This siege ended when Babylonia dethroned Jehoakhin, taking him into exile along with the rest of the royal family, officers, military, craftsman, and other notables (*II Kings* 24:10-16).