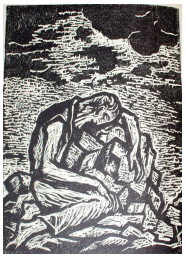
BIBEL FORUM
LEO BAECK COLLEGE

"Take us back, Eternal One, to Yourself,
and let us come back." (Lam. 5:21)
41st International Jewish-Christian Bible Week
The Book of Lamentations – Eichah
26th July to 2nd August 2009



INTRODUCTION TO EICHAH – THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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A few weeks ago I did a joint teaching session in Paris with Professor Tamara Eskenazi from the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. She spoke about the Song of Songs and the role of the poets in Biblical Israel. She suggested that they felt that one of their tasks was to produce a record of events in a form that was easy to remember, so that it would be available to the collective memory of the people. But by recording events the poet also offered an interpretation, trying to find meaning in what had happened. I found this explanation helpful in approaching Eichah. But in this case the priorities of the poet might almost be reversed. Such a catastrophic event as the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple, and the exiling of the king and leaders of the society, hardly needed to be recorded, as they would be deeply burned into the experience and memory of the survivors. But what was needed was some attempt at explaining the meaning of what had happened.

So I tried to imagine what the author of Eichah set about trying to achieve, or at least to formulate questions that would be with me as we study the text together. The very fact of creating a series of poems has its own significance. For what other means would have been available for preserving a record of what had happened? With the physical destruction of the city itself and of the Temple, with the deportation of the educated class, presumably including scribes and others who might have preserved a written record, the only means that would remain were the words that could be retained in the mind, to be recited over and over to generations yet to come. There may even have been a sense of the urgent need to create a record in case this really was the end of the social, political and religious history of the Israelite nation. Certainly in later periods of Jewish history people have imagined that they alone remained to tell the tale of what had happened, as if they were the last generation of Jews. There is even a book that addresses the subject under the title 'Israel: the ever dying people'. Perhaps that sense of urgency helps to account for the many different voices to be heard in Eichah. It is as if the author felt the need to present as many viewpoints and experiences and interpretations as possible just to make sure that nothing was left out, that he was being true to them all. But since what had to be included was limitless, the author set an artificial limit through the framework of the alphabetic acrostic. It has been said about the alphabetical lists of sins that we recite on Yom Kippur, that the number of sins that we might commit and confess to is infinite, but at least there is a limit to the number of letters in the alphabet.

What information did the author bring to the task? There are hints of a number of texts and traditions that the author refers to: the conditions attached to the covenant with God – spelled out as blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28; the casual reference to the Temple as God's footstool (compare Eichah 2:1 and Ps 99:5); the refer-

ence to nations who are forbidden to enter into the congregation of Israel (compare Eichah 1:10 and Deut 25:4) Above all, of course, we hear the warnings of the prophets, particularly Jeremiah, traditionally named as the author of Eichah. The book assumes a whole range of associations that would have been clear to his contemporaries who heard or read it.

What are the questions the author feels the need to answer? Has Israel's God been defeated by the gods of Babylon? If not, how to face the unacceptable idea that God supported the victorious Babylonians, indeed used them as the weapons of choice against God's own people. The answer seems to be to address this head on, switching between God and the Babylonians themselves as the sources of destruction. For the poet as believer, God has to be justified, even at the expense of Israel. But that cannot be a passive, pious surrender. Instead the reality of the suffering, the horror to be seen in the streets, the reduction of people to walking corpses, images that are all too familiar to us today from a hundred different besieged populations around the world – these are thrown at God. God too must see and experience what has happened.

I suggested earlier that the poet turned to words as the most potent means available to assure that the story of what happened was not forgotten. But there is another possible dimension as well. For with the destruction of the Temple and its cult, what other avenue was available to bring Israel close to God? Already the Psalms had provided liturgical settings to accompany sacrifices, and occasions to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. Psalm 51 even suggests that beyond the sacrifices other human behaviour could influence God: 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and crushed heart, O God, You will not despise (Ps 51:19). Perhaps the author was heeding the words of Hosea: 'Take with you words and return to God. Say to Him: Take away guilt and let us know good. We will make our whole offering with words instead of with bulls.' (Hos 14:3)

The author of Eichah, though broken in spirit is not crushed. He brings also his anger at the destruction, and hence also his hope, even expectation, that God's compassion will bring healing and renewal. Twice at least he calls for reciprocity in the relationship between God and Israel – the sort of expectation that can only exist within the framework of a covenant of mutual loyalty and faithfulness. He says: '[Indeed] we have transgressed and have rebelled; [But] You have not pardoned!' (Eichah 3:42). As the last but one sentence he brings the words that we chose as the motto for this Bible Week, words that expect a mutual act of drawing together between Israel and God, and that anticipate a future restoration despite all that has happened. 'Turn us to You, O God, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old!' (Eichah 5:21).