

10 Great Texts—Introduction and Background Information
“ ‘The God Who Weeps’: Divine Pathos as a Model for Human Empathy?”
Eicha Rabbati, Petihta 24

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Why this text? And why is this a “Great Text”?

How, as a religious community and as individuals, do we deal with catastrophe? What kinds of lessons, if any, can we learn from how our ancestors dealt with the disasters that befell them? And where is God in all of this? These are the big questions that can be explored through the text that we shall study together over the next several weeks.

The midrash *Eicha Rabbati* presents the Rabbis’ attempts to deal after the fact with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. (Although the biblical book on which they comment obviously deals with the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, the two communal catastrophes are elided in the Rabbis’ worldview, together with the disastrous outcome of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132-135 CE.) Of greatest interest to me in this text is how the Rabbis wrestle, often most poignantly, with their images of God and their notions of divine providence. This text provides a powerful window into how religious pondering responds and adjusts when bad things happen to chosen people (unfortunately, too often in Jewish history!). In the shadow of the horrors of the twentieth century—most prominently the Holocaust—it can be thought-provoking and even suggestive to examine how the Rabbis of late antiquity dealt with their holocaust. I am particularly fascinated, sometimes disturbed, and often moved by their human, all too human depictions of God and their daring anthropomorphisms (actually, anthropopathisms—depictions of God’s personality and emotions; in recent years, David Stern, Michael Fishbane, and David Kraemer, among others, have also been fascinated with these mythopoetic depictions and have written about them; see the bibliography below.)

The excerpt from *Eicha Rabbati* that we will study together over the next several weeks, the second half of the very long *Petihta* 24, is particularly poignant and suggestive to me; it is a lengthy, and quite daring, depiction of God’s own response to the destruction of His house (I will use gendered language here to be faithful to the texts), and God’s own inner conflict about this. The Rabbis’ imaginative projections onto the divine psyche here are fascinating and quite powerful. Since it is my personal conviction that narrative theology of this sort is ultimately more effective (and more psychologically truthful) than “systematic” theology,¹ I see this text, and others like it, as useful triggers for our own

¹ “Systematic theology” is technical terminology in Christianity for propositional, “philosophical” theology that articulates doctrine and demonstrates the logical relationships among ideas, often very abstractly. By “narrative theology,” I refer to theological discourse that concretizes and exemplifies its larger ideas through the form of story-telling. The characteristic rabbinic way of talking about God, for example, is analogical: *mashlu mashal l’mah hadavar domeh: l’melekh basar vadam sh . . .* (“They drew an analogy: To what may the matter be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who . . .”). This style makes abstract ideas accessible to the listener or reader by drawing on familiar experience (for this reason, it is the lifeblood of a good sermon!). Narrative is also the form in which we usually reflect on the meaning and

theological reflections—and I hope our joint study of this text will indeed provoke some such reflections among us all. What might we learn from “the God who weeps”?

The text: *Midrash Eicha Rabbati*

Before we begin, you will need some background information on the text. The *midrash* known as *Eicha Rabbati* (also *Eicha Rabbah* and, in early manuscripts, *(H)aggadat Eicha*, *Midrash Eicha*, or *Midrash Kinot*) is an amoraic text from the Byzantine era in the land of Israel (probably 5th century; its nearest parallels are with *Bereshit Rabbah* and *Pesiqta deRav Kahana*).² It is an exegetical *midrash* that anthologizes rabbinic comments and expositions, verse by verse, on the five chapters of the biblical book of Lamentations. Most unique and distinctive about this text from a formal point of view, however, is that it begins with a series of thirty-six *petihtot*,³ that is to say, expositions of **other** scriptural verses, mostly from Isaiah and Jeremiah, but also from Ezekiel, Hosea, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and even from Lamentations itself—each of which ends with the citation of Lam. 1:1, *Eicha yashvah vadad*. The thematic connection of most of these verses to the contents of the book of Lamentations is not hard to discern: many of them derive from prophetic oracles of rebuke or destruction or they deal with mourning. Sometimes the citation of Lam. 1:1 at the end of the *petihtot* is organic to the preceding discourse, but sometimes it is artificial and seems to have been “tacked on” in a formulary fashion: “Since/As soon as they sinned, they were exiled; and since/as soon as they were exiled, Jeremiah began to lament over them, *How solitary sits the city*.”⁴

Virtually all of these *petihtot* deal with the problem of theodicy: why did this disaster happen, and how can God’s actions be justified? Most often, the theodicy is traditional and deuteronomic: *mip’nei hata’einu galinu mei’artseinu*. A formally ingenious example of this is *Petihta* 11, on Deuteronomy 28:47-48, *Because you would*

“structure” of our lives and experiences, both individually and collectively. (We talk a lot these days about “personal narratives.”) Myth, historical narrative, autobiography, cautionary tale, and creative fiction all let us see and discover ourselves, often by indirection. (Think, for example, of Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment*.) Narratives can embrace contradiction, inconsistency, paradox, and multiple levels of meaning in a way that systematic theology cannot. The former, psychologically speaking, is often more truthful.

² The text has come down to us in two recensions, one from the Sephardic/Islamic milieu (Spain-North Africa-Iraq) and one from the Italian and Ashkenazic milieu (Italy, France, Germany, Provence). The version that appears in the *Midrash Rabbah* collection and that was first published in Constantinople around 1519 is the Sephardic recension. The text published by Solomon Buber in 1899 is the Ashkenazic recension. On the textual history of *Eicha Rabbati*, see Paul Mandel, “Between Byzantium and Islam: The Transmission of a Jewish Book in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods,” in Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershon, eds., *Transmitting Jewish Textual Traditions: Orality, Textuality and Cultural Diffusion* (New Haven, 2000), 74-106.

³ Printed editions of the text in *Midrash Rabbah* enumerate thirty-four *petihtot*, but they miss two that are unattributed (nos. 2b and 31b); Solomon Buber corrects this error in his edition. Some interpreters have maintained that the number of *petihtot*, thirty-six, is deliberate, corresponding to the numerical value of the word *eichah*. This is impossible to verify.

⁴ On formulary conclusions to *petihtot* in the so-called “homiletical” midrashim, see my article, “The Petihtot in Leviticus Rabbah: ‘Oral Homilies’ or Redactional Constructions?” in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982), 557-568.

not serve the Lord your God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve—in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything—the enemies whom the Lord will loose against you. The point of this verse is illustrated 22 times, through a reverse double acrostic, introduced each time by the formulary, “Had you been worthy you would have read in the Torah, [verse citation beginning with letter X], but now that you are unworthy you read [in the book of Lamentations], [verse citation beginning with same letter X].” Each of the verses of woe in the first chapter of Lamentations, proceeding backwards from *tav* to *aleph* (since the *petihta* formally must end with the citation of *eicha!*) is paired with a verse of blessing from the Torah that begins with the same letter of the alphabet, and often with the very same word as the Lamentations verse. For example, the first illustration, using the letter *tav*, reads, “Had you been worthy you would have read in the Torah, *You will bring them* [t’vi’eimo] *and plant them in Your own* mountain (Ex. 15:17), but now that you are unworthy you read [in Lamentations], *Let all their wrongdoing come* [tavo] *before You* (Lamentations 1:22).”. The medium here is the message: God’s punishment of Israel is justified *middah k’neged middah*, in paradigmatic deuteronomic fashion. But sometimes the Rabbis will voice more daring responses to the problem of theodicy—or these may lurk below the surface. Our text-study will consider one of those more daring responses.

Our text-study: Petihta 24

The text of *Petihta 24*, as it has come down to us, is heavily interpolated and formally complicated.⁵ It does not even end with the requisite citation of Lamentations 1:1, but rather with a *nehemta*, citing Jeremiah 31:16ff. (That, of course, will prove to be an appropriate conclusion for our text-study!) The *petihta* begins as an exposition of Isaiah 22:1ff., expounding in order verses 1-12 of this chapter:

Isaiah 22:1 The "Valley of Vision" Pronouncement. What can have happened to you that you have gone, all of you, up on the roofs,

² O you who were full of tumult, you clamorous town, you city so gay? Your slain are not the slain of the sword nor the dead of battle.

³ Your officers have all departed, they fled far away; your survivors were all taken captive, taken captive without their bows.

⁴ That is why I say, "Let me be, I will weep bitterly. Press not to comfort me for the ruin of my poor people."

⁵ For my Lord GOD of Hosts had a day of tumult and din and confusion . . .⁶

Interestingly, in the midrashic interpretation of v. 4, it is **God** who is weeping and the ministering angels who attempt to comfort Him. Their comfort is rejected. Already adumbrated here is the theme that will be taken up at greater length further on, in the portion that we will read together next week:

⁵ In fact, it is likely, on the basis of evidence from Genizah texts, that the entire section that we will be studying together is an interpolation into the text (and *that’s* why it doesn’t end with the requisite verse, Lamentations 1:1). See below, note 8.

⁶ Translation from *TANAKH: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

Therefore said I: Look away from Me, I will weep bitterly (Isa. 22: 4). R. Simeon b. Lakish said: On three occasions the Ministering Angels wished to utter song before the Holy One, blessed be He, but He would not let them, viz. [at the destruction of] the generation of the Flood, [at the overthrow of the Egyptians in] the Red Sea, and at the destruction of the Temple. . . .At the destruction of the Temple it is written, *Therefore said I: Look away from Me, I will weep bitterly, strain not to comfort Me* (Isa. 22: 4). It is not written here ‘do not gather together’ [*al t’asfu*], but ‘strain not’ [*al ta’itsu*, identified here with the root *nun-aleph-tsadi*, “to insult,” which indicates that] the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Ministering Angels, ‘The words of comfort which you offer to Me are insults to Me.’ For what reason? *For it is a day of trouble, and of trampling, and of perplexity for the Lord, the God of hosts* (Isa. 22:5): it is a day of confusion, a day of plundering, a day of weeping [i.e., a day on which words of comfort are not appropriate].⁷

The verse-by-verse exposition of Is. 22 continues, settling finally on v. 12:

My Lord GOD of Hosts summoned on that day to weeping and lamenting, to tonsuring and girding with sackcloth.

Two interpretations of this verse are offered. In the first, the ministering angels complain to God that they were created only to sing God’s praises; how then can they possibly lament? God rebukes them: now is not a time for songs of praise, only for laments.⁸ This is followed by “another interpretation,” which in fact is an exposition not of Is. 22:12 but of Psalm 42:5, *When I think of these, I pour out my soul*. Here it is the community of Israel that must lament, since it has been severely punished: “But what can I do, seeing that my iniquities have caused this to happen?” This is another iteration of the standard deuteronomistic theodicy. Now follows again “another interpretation,” the second, and longest, exposition of Is.22:12, which brings the *petihta* to a close. This is the text that we will study together. Here it is God again who sits in mourning, calling for others to weep on His behalf. This depiction—and its implications—is what we will ponder over the next several weeks.

⁷ Translation by A. Cohen from *The Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press, 1951).

⁸ Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, *Ginzé Midrash: The Oldest Forms of Rabbinic Midrashim according to Genizah Manuscripts* (Tel Aviv: The Chaim Rosenberg School for Jewish Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1976), 127, n. 77, points out that the rest of the text of this *petihta* is missing in a Genizah text of this passage (Cambridge T-S C.I.58). There the text concludes after the first interpretation of Is. 22:12 with the formulary, “As soon as they were exiled, Jeremiah began to lament over them and say, *Alas! How solitary sits the city . . .*” He notes that the continuation of the text in both the printed editions of *Midrash Rabbah* and the Buber edition begins with the words, “Another interpretation: This is what Scripture says through the holy spirit by the sons of Korah, *When I think of these I pour out my soul* [Ps. 42:5].” Not only is this disjunctive with what precedes it, since it expounds an entirely different verse [!], but the introductory formulary, *zehu sh’amar hakatuv b’ruah haqodesh al y’dei . . .* is characteristic of a later genre of midrashic materials that appear in the late Byzantine-early Islamic midrash *Pesikta Rabbati*, where they form a distinctive unit in that text. Together, both of these considerations constitute strong evidence that the text from this point on in this *petihta* is indeed a later interpolation. For our study this month, that information is interesting, but ultimately irrelevant: the provenance of the materials is of less concern to us than their content.

Selected bibliography

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on the content and ideas: [note that those in bold are available on-line as additional readings]

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