

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
By Rav Alex Israel

Dedicated in memory of Gertrude Spiegel a"h
by Patti and Michael Steinmetz and Family.

Shiur #28: Chapter 24-25
The Decline towards *Churban*

In many ways, the reign of Yoshiyahu functions as the climax of *Melakhim Bet*. His zealous eradication of idolatry, the covenantal ceremony that he enacts at the Temple and his efforts to achieve national reunification are all representative of the ideal model of the Judean king.

However, in the wake of Yoshiyahu's unexpected death, events plunge downwards in a succinctly described but exhausting descent towards national disintegration. The last four kings of Yehuda struggle under the crippling hegemony first of Egypt and then of Babylon, suffering military defeat, vassalage, humiliation, deportation, siege and torture. The sun is setting on the First Temple period and it will swiftly end in the conquest of Jerusalem and the exile of its people.

These tragic years may be represented as two rather parallel sequences of equal duration, the first under Egyptian domination and the second under Babylon:

Yehoachaz 23:31-35	3 months	23:31 – Yehoachaz reigns for 3 months. 23:33 – Yehoachaz is imprisoned by Pharaoh. The kingdom is taxed. 23:34 – Pharaoh replaces Yehoachaz with Elyakim, And renames him Yehoyakim. Yehoachaz is deported to Egypt.
Yehoyakim 23:36-24:6	11 years	23:36 – Yehoyakim reigns for 11 years. 24:1 – Yehoyakim rebels against Babylon. 24:2-4 – Yehuda endures military invasion, reflecting God's decree.
<i>24:7 – Transition: Babylon rises as the regional power</i>		
Yehoyakhin 24:8-25:7	3 months	24:8 – Yehoyakhin reigns for 3 months. 24:12 – Yehoyakhin is imprisoned by Nevukhadnetzar. 24:13 – Nevukhadnetzar seizes the Temple and royal treasuries 24:17 – Pharaoh replaces Yehoyakhin with Matanya

		and renames him Tzidkiyahu. 24:15 – Yehoyakhin is deported to Babylon.
Tzidkiyahu 24:18-25:7	11 years	24:18 – Tzidkiyahu reigns for 11 years. 24:20 – Tzidkiyahu rebels against Babylon. Ch. 25 – Babylon attacks Jerusalem, and the Temple is destroyed.

YEHOACHAZ

Yehoachaz¹ is crowned king by the “*Am Ha-aretz*,” the powerful group affiliated with royalty. Yehoachaz is not the oldest of Yoshiyahu's children; as such, there must have been a good reason for his selection. Some speculate that he held political views that were pro-Babylonian and anti-Egyptian. This would explain his selection by the “*Am Ha-aretz*” group who were politically aligned with Yoshiyahu. Yoshiyahu had confronted Nekho in battle on his way northwards to Karkemish in a move to limit Egyptian control of the region, but had severely underestimated Nekho's power. Now, as Nekho returns to the region from war, he dominates Yehuda, replacing the new king Yehoachaz with his older brother Yehoyakim. Yehoachaz had been on the throne for a mere three months. Pharaoh Nekho evidently perceived his brother Yehoyakim as more favorably inclined towards Egypt.²

Pharaoh's domination of Israel is expressed in three ways:

- He removes Yehoachaz and exiles him to Egypt.
- He appoints a new monarch and changes his name, a sign of his control of Judean national policy.
- He imposes a crushing tribute upon the new king.

YEHYOYAKIM

Yehoyakim ascends the throne burdened with a huge Egyptian-imposed tax tribute. How does he finance it? His direct source of income is the upper classes of society:

Yehoyakim gave Pharaoh the silver and the gold, and he made an assessment of the land to pay the money demanded by Pharaoh. He exacted the silver and gold from the *Am Ha-aretz* according to the assessment to pay Pharaoh Nekho. (23:35)

Although the landed upper classes are directly responsible for funding the national tribute, it is the lowest social stratum of society that pays the real price, as the aristocracy reduces the pay of manual laborers in order to insulate their own fortunes. This situation results in widespread exploitation of

¹ See *Yirmiyahu* 22:11 and *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 3:15 in which he is called Shalum. It seems that Yehoachaz was a name he adopted when he ascended the throne.

² See *Olam Ha-Tanakh* and *Da'at Mikra*. Both commentaries also suggest the possibility that inner palace politics relating to the relative influence of Chamutal (Yehoachaz's mother) and Zevuda (Yehoyakim's mother) may have affected the decision.

the poor; a societal disgrace that is roundly condemned by the prophet.³ When the king embarks on an ambitious building project and it is the peasantry that pays the price, Yirmiyahu pays the sovereign a visit:

Thus said the Lord: Go down to the palace of the king of Judah, where you shall utter this word...

Woe! He who builds his house with unfairness and his upper chambers with injustice, who makes his fellow man work without pay, and does not give him his wages. Who thinks: I will build me a vast palace with spacious upper chambers, provided with windows paneled in cedar, painted with vermilion!... Your father ate and drank and dispensed justice and equity – then all went well with him. He upheld the rights of the poor and needy – then all was well. That is truly heeding Me – declares the Lord.⁴ (*Yirmiyahu* 22:13-16)

Yirmiyahu informs the king that his rule would endure only if he desisted from the corruption that prevailed in his kingdom.

NATIONAL INDIFFERENCE

In the fourth year of Yehoyakim's reign, 605 BCE, Nevukhadnetzar succeeds his father Nebopolassar and takes the reins of his kingdom. He

³ Yirmiyahu specifies a series of crimes: "Thus said the Lord: Do what is just and right; rescue from the defrauder him who is robbed; do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow; commit no violent act and do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place." (*Yirmiyahu* 22:13-14). In connection with bloodshed, see *Melakhim* 24:4 – the *pasuk* is somewhat ambiguous; possibly the ambiguity intends to equate Yehoyakim's murderous regime with that of Menashe. For an instance in which he hunts down and kills an innocent prophet, see *Jeremiah* 26:22-23.

⁴ Some see the Ramat Rachel archeological site, dated by Yochanan Aharoni to the period of Yehoyakim, as a possible candidate for this very palace. Aharoni writes:

"We did not expect a ruler of the Kingdom of Judah to have built a royal palace and fort outside the borders of ancient Jerusalem, on the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Above ground level, we found massive hewn stones of a type not usually used in that period, except in palaces and luxury buildings. In the stratum from the period of the destruction of the Temple, we found the handle of a pitcher that had been sealed with a Hebrew inscription: "[belonging] to Eliyakim, lad of Yokhan?' Albright identified the "Yokhan" of the inscription with Yokhinu, mentioned in Assyrian writings - none other than Yehoiakim's son Yekhoniah, who ruled only three months before he was exiled to Babylonia. It is unusual in itself for a king to build a palace outside the city. It is evident from the few remains that were preserved that this was without a doubt a most magnificent palace, built with the most advanced architectural and artistic techniques of the period. In this context, it is fitting to cite the verses from *Jer.* 36:22 which describe how Baruch son of Neriah brought the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecy to Yehoyakim, who flung it upon the blazing brazier. It states there that "the king sat in the winter house." "Winter house" implies that he also had a summer house ...It makes sense that Yehoyakim's summer home would be located among the vineyards outside the city, next to Ramat Rachel. What a unique case in the history of biblical archaeology: The cedar window panes displayed in the Israel Museum are the very panes that Jeremiah faced as he prophesied." (Y. Aharoni, "Woe to Him who builds His house with unfairness," in Luria, *Studies in Jeremiah* ii, 53-67) [Hebrew].

immediately wages war against Egypt at their advance base in Karkemish and roundly defeats the Egyptian forces. He sweeps southwards to the Mediterranean coast, capturing Ashkelon a year later. The tide has changed direction, and now Babylon, not Egypt, is the dominant regional force. This is expressed by *Sefer Melakhim*:

The King of Egypt did not come again out of his land, for the King of Babylon had taken all that belonged to the King of Egypt from the Brook of Egypt to the river Euphrates. (24:7)

We don't know quite when Yehuda came under Babylonian control, but it seems that notwithstanding Yirmiyahu's repeated warnings of exile and destruction, the people remained complacent. Why?

The word that came to Yirmiyahu from God: "Stand at the gate of the House of God and there proclaim this word: '...All you of Judah who enter these gates to worship God... mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don't put your trust in illusions and say, 'The Temple of God, the Temple of God, the Temple of God!' ... You are relying on illusions that are of no avail. Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely and sacrifice to Ba'al and follow other gods⁵ ... and then come stand before Me in this House that bears My name and say, 'We are safe!' ... Do you consider this House that bears My name to be a den of thieves?'" (*Yirmiyahu* 7:4-11)

Yirmiyahu preaches at the Temple gates. He accuses the nation of transgressing the Ten Commandments, a grievous array of sins. He suggests that the Temple ritual cannot remedy or mask the corruption that characterizes Jerusalem's society. And yet the people remain dispassionate and unworried, saying "We are safe!" Why are people unalarmed by the advancing Babylonians and Yirmiyahu's harsh predictions? Because they believe that The Temple of God is invincible, that God will never destroy His own house. This is a perspective that became entrenched in the wake of the last major invasion – that of Sancheriv of Assyria – during Chizkiyahu's reign. Then, the towns and countryside of Yehuda was ravaged, but Jerusalem was miraculously spared. The powerful event evidently led to a popular belief that God would never wreak ruin and destruction upon his Temple, and as a result the people regarded any threat thereafter with a spirit of nonchalance. Yirmiyahu looks to shake them from their apathy by reminding them of a different historical precedent:

Just go to My place at Shilo, where I had established My name originally, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel. And now, because you do all these things... I will do to the House that bears My name, on which you rely... just what I did to Shilo. And I will cast you out of My presence as I cast out your brothers, the whole offspring of Ephraim. (7:13-16)

⁵ Yirmiyahu's reference to murder, adultery, stealing, false oaths and idolatry express the violation of the Ten Commandments.

Shilo was the original site of the *Mishkan*, and yet God destroyed it due to the wickedness of Israel. God promises that the Temple will suffer the same fate if Israel continues its reprehensible way of living.

BURNING THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET

This prophecy offers some insight on the complacency of the nation in this period. At a later date, events precipitate a greater degree of concern and tension. *Yirmiyahu* 36 records a national fast day in Yehoyakim's fifth year in the same month as Ashkelon's capture by the Babylonians.⁶ For the kingdom, the proximity of Nevukhadnetzar was viewed with considerable anxiety, and a fast day was pronounced to appeal to God. People now started to become more receptive to Yirmiyahu's warnings of an impending national tragedy and to his call for repentance. Senior government figures receive a scroll documenting Yirmiyahu's prophecies of devastation. It alarms them, and they present the scroll to King Yehoyakim:

It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter palace, with a fire burning in front of him. Whenever Yehudi⁷ read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire.⁸ (*Yirmiyahu* 36:22-23)

In other words, the king is impervious to the divine warnings and the messages sent via prophecy. The kingdom is destined for disaster.

RESISTING BABYLON

Yehoyakim was loyal to Babylon for three years, but then rebelled (24:1). Most scholars see his revolt as a response to Egypt's defeat of the Babylonian forces in 601 BCE. Yehoyakim seized the opportunity of Babylon's regional vulnerability and rebelled. However, Babylon strikes back immediately. The next year, Nevukhadnetzar instigated a military response, directing his allies and mercenaries, "the bands of the Chaldeans and bands of the Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it" (24:2). At this point, Nevukhadnetzar himself was preoccupied in other regions. Babylonian records show that Nevukhadnetzar returned to the region only in 598 BCE, Yehoyakim's 11th year. By the time Nevukhadnetzar began his siege of Jerusalem, Yehoyakim had died.⁹

⁶ See *Da'at Mikra*, which connects this fast day with the capture of Ashkelon.

⁷ A courtier

⁸ See the rabbinic reading of this episode in *Mo'ed Katan* 26a.

⁹ See *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 36:6-7: Nevukhadnetzar incarcerates Yehoyakim and brings him to Babylon in chains. See Rashi (on *Melakhim* II 24:6) whose commentary seeks to bridge the contradiction between the two sources, and also to accommodate Yirmiyahu's prediction that Yehoyakim will be buried like a donkey (*Yirmiyahu* 22:19). The *midrash* in *Vayikra Rabba* 19:6 offers a range of opinions, all of which suggest that the *Sanhedrin* surrendered Yehoyakim to Nevukhadnetzar rather than allowing Jerusalem to be destroyed.

As we have observed, Yehoyakim's ignominious reign was characterized by deep corruption and thorough deafness to God's word. Even a cursory reading of the book of *Yirmiyahu* demonstrates the degree to which God sounded the alarm of foreboding catastrophe. In this critical period, both nation and king were tragically impervious to God's warnings and unable to conceive of the grim events to come.

YEHYOYAKHIN AND THE FIRST WAVE OF EXILE

Yehoyakhin reigned for only three months.¹⁰ A child king, he came to power at the age of eight, and immediately found himself besieged by the mighty Babylonian forces. Initially, the text indicates (24:10) the arrival of Babylonian forces. But at the next stage, “Nevukhadnetzar arrives at the city and his servants were besieging it” (24:11) – the emperor himself arrives. Jerusalem hardly resists; Babylonian historical records chronicle the arrival of the military forces in Kislev and the surrender of Yehoyakhin on the 2nd of Adar, matching the chronology of *Sefer Melakhim* perfectly. As we know, Jerusalem was capable of withstanding a siege for far longer than three months, and no battle or conquest is mentioned in *Melakhim*. As such, it is reasonable to assume that Yehoyakhin, or his advisors, made a worthwhile tradeoff, to surrender the king in order to save the city.

Pointedly, this surrender and the humiliating and devastating exile that followed is dated to the eighth year of Nevukhadnetzar's reign. Since *Melakhim* hardly ever dates an event by the regnal years of a foreign ruler, this merely demonstrates the nation's helplessness in the face of foreign domination. Nevukhadnetzar, however, was not satisfied with the mere removal of the national figurehead, nor with their appointment of Yehoyakhin's brother Matanya, a monarch sympathetic to Babylon. He stripped the Temple of its golden vessels and emptied it and the royal treasury of their wealth. He also exiled the leaders of society; *Melakhim* offers a detailed register of the deportees – royalty, the aristocracy, the military, skilled craftsmen, industrialists – all in all, ten thousand exiles.

He carried away Yehoyachin to Babylon. The king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the chief men of the land he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor... and the craftsmen and the metal workers... war.

Among the exiles are personalities that we meet elsewhere in Tanakh:

There was a certain Jew in Shushan ...whose name was Mordekhai, son of Ya'ir, son of Shime'i, son of Kish, a Benjamite, who¹¹ **had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives that had been carried away with Yekhoniya¹² king of Judah**, whom Nevukhadnetzar the king of Babylon had carried away. (*Esther* 2:5-6)

¹⁰ *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 36:9 records Yehoyakhin's reign as three months and ten days.

¹¹ It is likely that Kish was the one who was exiled, not Mordekhai.

¹² This is an alternate name for Yehoyakhin.

Yet another character exiled at this time is a priest – the prophet Yechezkel. The baseline of the dating system used to mark his prophecy is the year of Yehoyakhin's exile.¹³ Yechezkel's prophetic role was to offering God's perspective to the exiles of Yehuda, on the tumultuous events befalling Jerusalem.

GOOD FIGS AND BAD FIGS

With the exile of Yehoyakhin, Jerusalem has reached a new low point. Only “the poorest people in the land were left” (24:14). Now, for the first time in Jewish history, we have a situation in which there are two centers of Jewish life (each with a Judean king¹⁴): one in exile and the other in Jerusalem. Which one shall prosper? Yirmiyahu's prophecy is frightening and ominous:

After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken Yechoniah...into exile from Jerusalem...God showed me this vision: Behold, two baskets of figs were placed before the Temple of God... One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.... Then the word of God came to me: “...Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Yehuda whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.”

“Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehuda, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. I will send sword, famine and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.”
(*Yirmiyahu* 24:1-10)

¹³ See *Yechezkel* 1:2.

¹⁴ Clearly Nevukhadnetzar wants to keep a Judean king on the throne in Jerusalem. Why does he deport one ruler, merely to appoint another in his stead? Interestingly, Babylonian official records continue to address Yehiyachin as king, even after his exile. Rav Yaakov Medan has suggested that the imprisonment of a Judean king in Babylon – Yehoyachin is released after 37 years! – was a tool to humiliate and intimidate the population of Jerusalem as they knew that a reigning king of Yehuda was held by the king of Babylon. In this vein, King Saul fears to be taken alive as a prisoner lest the Phillistines torment and torture him, (Shmuel II 31:4) a fate that befell Samson. One could suggest that Yehoyachin was similarly used as a psychological weapon against his people.