

THE BOOK OF *YIRMIYAHU*

INTRODUCTION

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In this series, we will be studying together most of the chapters in the book of *Yirmiyahu*. We will closely examine the book's prophecies of rebuke and consolation, which were delivered during one of the stormiest and most difficult periods in the history of the Jewish People, prophecies that foretold the imminent destruction of Yehuda and Jerusalem in a desperate attempt to prevent it. We will attempt to understand the unique, tormented, and tragic figure of Yirmiyahu, the prophet of doom, who left his strong personal stamp on the entire book. For the most part, our study will follow the order of the chapters and it will encompass most of the book's chapters and its main themes. In each *shiur*, I will focus on one prophecy, which I will analyze from different perspectives – the literary structure, the textual interpretation, the historical context, and the conceptual meaning - using a variety of exegetical and literary tools.

I hope that this will be an interesting, productive, and serious study, one which will allow us to become better acquainted with one of the greatest prophets of our people and will help make his prophecies more understandable and more relevant for us.

I. Introductory Verses

As is common in the books of the Prophets, the book of *Yirmiyahu* opens with an introduction that briefly relates to the prophet and his period. The introduction to the book of *Yirmiyahu* is exceptionally long - three verses - and it is the most detailed in the books of the Prophets. The long introduction to the book reveals several important facts about Yirmiyahu. These serve us as a sort of portal, through which we enter the special world of Yirmiyahu and his book.

The words of Yirmiyahu the son of Chilkiyahu, of the priests who were in Anatot in the land of Binyamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Yoshiyahu the son of Amon king of Yehuda, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Yehoyakim the son of Yehoshiyahu king of Yehuda, to the end of the eleventh year of Tzidkiyahu the son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda, to the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month. (*Yirmiyahu* 1:1-3)

The first verse provides several biographical details about Yirmiyahu and is typical of the verses that open the books of the Prophets. The opening word, "*Divrei*" ("the words of"), is relatively exceptional in the books of the Prophets. It appears, in addition to here in the book of *Yirmiyahu*, only in the book of *Amos*. All the other books of the Prophets open with different words that denote prophecy. For example, the book of *Yeshayahu* opens with the phrase: "**The vision of** Yeshayahu, the son of Amotz." The book of *Hoshea* opens with the words: "**The word of the Lord that came to Hoshea, the son of Be'eri.**" And the book of *Chavakuk* opens with: "**The burden** which Chavakuk the prophet did see."

Indeed, even with regard to Yirmiyahu, it immediately says in the following verse: "To whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Yoshiyahu." It is thus reasonable to conclude that we have here a generalization followed by a specification. The words of Yirmiyahu referred to in verse 1 are prophecies, the word of God that came to him, as mentioned in verse 2. However, the distinction between the "words of Yirmiyahu" and the "word of the Lord" suggests the possibility that we are actually dealing here with two different "words." The Radak proposes an interesting interpretation in this vein:

It opens with the word "*Divrei*" ("the words of") because the book includes words of prophecy that [Yirmiyahu] prophesied about Israel and about the nations, and also words about himself, what happened to him with his prophecy with Israel... Similarly, Amos relates about himself: "Amos has conspired against you" (*Amos* 7:10), and the entire matter as it is written. Similarly, Yirmiyahu relates at the beginning of his book about himself: "Before I formed you in the belly" (*Yirmiyahu* 1:5), and the entire matter. And similarly in his book, he relates of the evil done to him.

According to the Radak, "the words of Yirmiyahu" refer to the biographical details that are integrated into the book in addition to the substance of the prophecies included therein. Indeed, one of the striking features that distinguish the book of *Yirmiyahu* from the other books of the Prophets is the combination of his life story and biography together with his prophecies. There is no other prophet whose biography and the background of his prophecies are related in such great detail. Familiarity with Yirmiyahu's place and background is especially vital for understanding his prophecies. Only in their light can we understand the great tension between his mission and his life and surroundings that can be felt in many places throughout the book, as we shall see later in our study. On the substantive level, apart from the many prophecies, the book inseparably incorporates stories, prayers, lamentations, and short poems of a personal nature.

The verses that follow note two biographical facts about Yirmiyahu:

1. "Of the priests who were in Anatot in the land of Binyamin." Yirmiyahu traces his ancestry to a priestly family.¹ One of the priestly functions, as stated in the Torah, is to teach God's Torah to the people: "They shall teach Yaakov your judgments and Israel your Torah" (*Devarim* 33:10). Yirmiyahu's preoccupation with the Torah and Halakha is clear from his many references to the Torah's commandments in his prophecies, as we shall see already in his first prophecy of rebuke (chapters 2-3) and in other places.

2. "Who were in Anatot." Anatot was a priestly city near Wadi Perat.² Anatot is identified today in close proximity to the village of Anata, about seven kilometers northeast of Jerusalem.³ Even this biographical detail left its mark on the prophecies of Yirmiyahu, who is also called "Yirmiyahu of Anatot" (*Yirmiyahu* 29:27). The wadi's landscapes, its flora and fauna, are reflected in Yirmiyahu's prophecies and his varied images. His prophecies reflect familiarity with the world of shepherds, and it is even possible that he himself was a shepherd in his youth.⁴

The unique location of Anatot – at the edge of the desert, overlooking the Judean desert to the east - is also reflected in some of Yirmiyahu's prophecies that deal with the tension between the desert and populated areas. Anatot is located on the border from a political perspective as well – it is in "the land of Binyamin," near the border of the destroyed kingdom of Efrayim. The prophecies of Yirmiyahu relate in several places to the union of the kingdoms and of the return of the people of Efrayim to Yehuda. Anatot itself is mentioned several times in the book; the people of Anatot pursue Yirmiyahu (11:21, 12:6), and he wishes to redeem his uncle Chanamel's field found in Anatot (32:9).

II. The Historical Context of Yirmiyahu's Prophecies

At the end of the introduction, the verses state that Yirmiyahu began to prophesy in the days of Yoshiyahu. But the verse specifies two different points in time regarding the end of his prophecy:

To the end of the eleventh year of Tzidkiyahu the son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda, **to** the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month.

¹ The Radak, in the name of his father, R. Yosef Kimchi, writes that Chilkiyahu, the father of Yirmiyahu, was the High Priest in the days of Yoshiyahu who found the Torah scroll. There is, however, no proof for this assertion, as the name Chilkiyahu was a common name in this period. In fact, it is precisely Yirmiyahu's distance from the Temple, owing to his residing in Anatot, that weakens this possibility.

² In *Yehoshua* 21:18, Anatot is mentioned as one of the cities given to the priests.

³ Some doubt this identification and propose instead Ras-al-Charuba, which is located nearby.

⁴ An interesting attempt to explain many of Yirmiyahu's prophecies in light of the scenery of Anatot and Wadi Perat is found in N. Hareuveni, "*Or Chadash al Sefer Yirmiyahu*." A similar approach is found in Y. Felix's articles about *Yirmiyahu* in his book, "*Teva Va-Aretz Ba-Tanakh*."

The term "to" (*ad*) appears here twice. The first is the usual way of marking time in the introductions to the books of the Prophets, and, as stated, it relates to the days of King Tzidkiyahu. But the second appearance is unique to Yirmiyahu, marking the central event that occurred in his day – the exile of Jerusalem. This ending is meant to highlight the fact that Yirmiyahu is the prophet of destruction, and his prophetic mission therefore ends with the exile of Jerusalem.

We will now briefly expand upon the period in which Yirmiyahu prophesied and examine the historical processes that occurred then, as well as the internal developments in the kingdom of Yehuda at that time (described in detail at the end of the book of *Melakhim*).

Yirmiyahu prophesied during one of the most tempestuous periods in ancient times. He began to prophesy in the thirteenth year of Yoshiyahu's reign (as stated below 25:3) in 627 BCE. That year was a turning point in world history. In 626, Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria, died. Following his death, the mighty kingdom of Assyria, which had dominated the ancient Near East for nearly a century, began to disintegrate and lose its power. In 625, Nevupolasar, founder of the new kingdom of the Kasdim, ascended the royal throne of Babylonia and began trying to expand the borders of his kingdom and assume the place of Assyria as ruler of the Near East. In 612, the city of Ninveh, the capital city of Assyria, was captured by the Babylonians, but the Egyptians came to Assyria's assistance. In the decisive battle between Babylonia and Egypt in Karkamish in 605, Nevuchadnetzar, the son of Nevupolasar, struck out against Pharaoh Nekho and forced him to return to his country. This victory assured Babylonia rule over the entire western part of the Assyrian kingdom up to the river of Egypt, which included the kingdom of Yehuda.

This historical event had a direct bearing on the kingdom of Yehuda. After long years of subjugation to the kingdom of Assyria, there was now a possibility of the renewal of the sovereignty of the kingdom of Yehuda and its neighbors. This opportunity was exploited by Yoshiyahu, who expanded his realm to the north in areas that had been Assyrian provinces, towards the territory of Efrayim, Samaria, and Megiddo, which in the past had been part of the kingdom of Israel. At the same time that he was engaged in his military and territorial buildup, in the eighteenth year of his reign (622 BCE), following the discovery of a Torah scroll in the Sanctuary, Yoshiyahu undertook a broad and comprehensive process of religious repair in the kingdom of Yehuda. He destroyed the private altars and sites of idol worship, and he renewed the covenant between Israel and God (II *Melakhim* 22-23). Through these two processes, Yoshiyahu wishes to restore the kingdom of Yehuda to its days of glory in the political and religious spheres – to the days of David and Shelomo.

However, geopolitical events did not allow the renewed kingdom of Yehuda to remain at peace. A fierce struggle broke out between the new Babylonian kingdom and the kingdom of Egypt. The kingdom of Yehuda, which sat between the two powers, was unwillingly dragged into the great

military confrontation that surrounded it. Another tragic event was Yoshiyahu's fall at the battle of Megiddo into the hands of Pharaoh Nekho (in 609 BCE). This event paved the way for the shocks that subsequently befell Yehuda, as its rulers changed their political allegiances from time to time. This led to a long series of subjugations and rebellions, up until the destruction of the Temple. As stated, Yoshiyahu was killed by the Egyptians; his son Yehoachaz was crowned by Pharaoh, but three months later he was exiled to Egypt, apparently because he adopted a pro-Babylonian position. Following his exile, the Egyptians crowned Yehoyakim, his elder brother, who represented the pro-Egyptian line, and at the same time they levied a heavy tax on Yehuda. Even this did not stabilize the kingdom; in that same year (605), Egypt was beaten by Nevuchadnetzar at the battle in Karkamish, and from that point on the scale was tipped in favor of Babylonia, Yehuda becoming a Babylonian protectorate.

In the time of Yehoyakim, Yoshiyahu's repair process dissipated and there began a religious and moral decline, which deepened until the destruction, as is apparent from the prophecies of Yirmiyahu. In 600, Yehoyakim rebelled against Babylonia, despite Yirmiyahu's warning not to do so, apparently due to another war between Babylonia and Egypt. His son Yehoyakhin ruled in his place (for only three months), surrendered to the Babylonian army that had laid siege against Jerusalem, and went into exile together with many of the residents of Jerusalem – princes, soldiers, and weapons manufacturers.

Yehoyakhin's uncle, Matanya, the son of Yoshiyahu, was crowned by Nevuchadnetzar, and he changed his name to Tzidkiyahu. Despite the oath to the king of Babylonia, and despite the repeated entreaties of Yirmiyahu, Tzidkiyahu, the last king of Yehuda, rebelled against Babylonia. This revolt ended with the final destruction of Yehuda, Jerusalem, and the Temple. Thus, the independence of the kingdom of Yehuda came to an end and the period of the Babylonian exile began.⁵

III. Yirmiyahu Among the Books of the Prophets

The famous *baraita* in tractate *Bava Batra* (14b) discusses the order of the books of Scripture and the identities of their authors.

The order of the Prophets: *Yehoshua*, *Shofetim*, *Shemuel*, *Melakhim*, *Yirmiyahu*, *Yechezkel*, *Yeshayahu*, and *Shneim Asar*.

According to the order of Scripture as we know it, the book of *Yirmiyahu* actually follows the book of *Yeshayahu*, reflecting their chronological order. But according to the tradition of the Babylonian Amoraim,

⁵ Even after the exile, there remained a small chance of rehabilitating the nation in its land, in the figure of Gedalya son of Achikam. We will deal with this at length when we reach the end of the book.

the book of *Yirmiyahu* comes before the book of *Yeshayahu*.⁶ The *gemara* raises an objection against this order:

But surely *Yeshaya* was earlier than *Yirmiyahu* and *Yechezkel*. Let then *Yeshayahu* be placed first? Because the book of *Melakhim* ends with a record of destruction and *Yirmiyahu* is entirely destruction, and *Yechezkel* commences with destruction and ends with consolation, and *Yeshayahu* is entirely consolation; therefore, we put destruction next to destruction and consolation next to consolation.

According to the Babylonian Talmud, it is preferable to put the book of *Yirmiyahu* first and juxtapose it to the book of *Melakhim* owing to the similarity between their respective contents: a description of the destruction. A tradition brought in this Talmudic passage states that *Yirmiyahu* also authored the book of *Melakhim*, thus reinforcing the connection between them.⁷

It is also worth noting the contrast that the *gemara* notes between the books of *Yeshayahu* and *Yirmiyahu*: *Yeshayahu* is characterized as a book that is "entirely consolation," while the book of *Yirmiyahu* is "entirely destruction." This characterization certainly does not accurately reflect the contents of the books; in the book of *Yeshayahu* there are prophecies of rebuke and calamity, and in the book of *Yirmiyahu* there are also prophecies of consolation. But it does express the general trend of each book and the fundamental contrast between them.

To understand the significance of the contrast, we must expand the comparison between the books. The two prophets prophesied in similar periods. *Yeshayahu* lived during the time of the ascent of, the mighty empire of Assyria, whose boundaries reached the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and breached the sphere of influence of the ancient kingdom of Egypt. In its aspiration for power, the kingdom of Assyria also struck the territory of the tribes of the kingdom of Israel. It put an end to the land of Efrayim and was about to conquer Yehuda as well. In the days of *Yirmiyahu*, a similar historical event took place. The kingdom of Babylonia inherited the kingdom of Assyria. It too aspired to be a mighty empire, it too took on Egypt, and in its aspiration for power it struck the kingdom of Yehuda and put an end to it.

⁶ The Radak relates to this difference in his introduction to the book of *Yirmiyahu*: "We find this book in the order of the prophets after the book of *Yeshayahu*. And so too I wrote its commentary after the commentary to *Yeshayahu*, and this despite the fact that they are not arranged in this manner in the words of our Rabbis, of blessed memory... Nevertheless, in all of the reliable manuscripts that I saw written in Spain over many years, they are arranged chronologically: *Yeshayahu* comes before *Yirmiyahu*, just as the former's time came before the latter's time. And so too *Yirmiyahu* comes before *Yechezkel*." The Abravanel expresses a similar position in his introduction to the book. It stands to reason that the order found in the *baraita* reflects a Babylonian tradition, whereas the order familiar to us, the chronological order, is based on a tradition from *Eretz Yisrael*. See also the introduction of Amos Chakham to the *Da'at Mikra* edition of the book of *Yeshayahu*.

⁷ This tradition is reinforced by, among other things, various striking parallels between the end of the book of *Melakhim* and the book of *Yirmiyahu*.

The similar background to the prophecies of Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu highlights the fundamental difference between them. Yeshaya is the great prophet of salvation. It was he who counseled Chizkiyahu in the days of Sancheriv not to surrender, and he prophesied the fall of the Assyrian army at the walls of Jerusalem, which would bring about the miraculous rescue of the city. Yirmiyahu, on the other hand, demanded that the kings in the days of Nevuchadnetzar totally surrender to the Babylonian power, and he prophesied the fall of the city and its king into the hands of the Babylonians and the exile of Yehuda. Another interesting difference between the two prophets, connected to the difference mentioned above, relates to the role of the prophets' families in their prophecies. In the case of Yeshayahu, his sons are a sign for Israel (chapters 7-8), whereas in the case of Yirmiyahu, it is precisely his childlessness that foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and the calamity that will befall it (chapter 16). This is a tragic element in the life of Yirmiyahu, one of many, that reflects the fate of his people. We will further clarify the significance of these fundamental differences between the two great prophets over the course of our study.

IV. The Structure of the Book

Unlike the other prophetic books, the principles of whose arrangement are relatively clear and generally based on chronological order, the structure of the book of *Yirmiyahu* is not entirely evident. Although a date is given for some of the prophecies, the overall arrangement of the book provides no indication of chronological order. Nevertheless, we can point to some fundamental units in the book that are distinguished by their style and the content of the prophecies contained within them. I will define them briefly:

1. Chapters 1-25: Prophecies of rebuke: This is the largest unit in the book, but also the vaguest in terms of its structure and contents. It is primarily composed of prophecies of rebuke from different periods, and almost no narratives. What this means is that prophecies mentioned in this unit sometimes reappear in their literary and historical contexts later in the book. (The most striking example of this phenomenon is the prophecies in chapter 7 and chapter 26).

2. Chapters 26-29: Yirmiyahu's prophecies and stories of confrontation with the false prophets: In these chapters, there are several stories about prophecies of rebuke that Yirmiyahu delivered in public and which led to a public confrontation between him and various parties, who at times tortured him: the priests, false prophets, and others. The struggle between Yirmiyahu and the false prophets appears throughout the book, but its essence is concentrated in these chapters.

3. Chapters 35-44: Stories and prophecies from the days of Yehoyakim to the destruction: Yirmiyahu's prophecies to Israel end with a unit of chapters that are arranged for the most part in chronological order, beginning in the days of Yehoyakim and continuing until the destruction and the arrival of the remnant of the survivors in Egypt. In these chapters, Yirmiyahu's prophecies are integrated in the historical narrative.

4. Chapters 30-33: A book of prophecies of consolation: This unit of chapters contains Yirmiyahu's prophecies of consolation, which were delivered during different periods and relate to both the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Yehuda.

5. Chapters 46-51: Prophecies about the nations: Like other prophetic books, the book of *Yirmiyahu* has a unit of prophecies about the nations, and it is this unit with which the book closes.⁸

(Translated by David Strauss)

⁸ Chapter 52 is not part of Yirmiyahu's prophecies and serves as sort of an "historical appendix" to the book that describes the destruction of Jerusalem as foretold by Yirmiyahu. It parallels the end of the book of *Melakhim*.