

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

By Dr. Tova Ganzel

Shiur #11: Prophecy and Prophets (12:21-14:11)

Having completed our discussion of the kings of Yehuda, we return to our study of Yehezkel's prophecies proceeding in order, from 12:21. In this series of prophetic units, Yehezkel responds to prophecies conveyed by speakers who falsely attribute their messages to God. The great diversity of "prophetic" messages that Yehezkel addresses offers us an indirect indication of the scope of the challenge Yehezkel faced in this area, and of the power of prophets who do not speak in God's Name.¹ Based on their location in the Book and their content, it is clear that this series of prophetic units preceded the Destruction; the units are arranged consecutively because of the content they share (like the collection of prophecies to the nations in Chapters 25-32).

Yehezkel's determined struggle is apparent through his repeated emphasis in this series of prophetic units that his message comes from God ("So says the Lord..." / "... says the Lord God").² The contrast he draws is with those who have no authority to convey God's word. The proliferation of false prophets at this difficult time for the nation is unsurprising. Seeking comfort and consolation at any price to counter the dark prophecies of Yehezkel in Babylon and of Yirmiyahu in Jerusalem, the people are ready to accept these "prophets" and their message.

The prophets whose messages run counter to those of Yehezkel are divided into different groups, whose order in the text may reflect their respective popularity. Yehezkel first addresses their prophetic content – which, it appears, was disseminated widely both in the Land and among the exiles. Then he addresses the false male prophets, who appear to have been the largest group both in the Diaspora and in Yehuda; thereafter he addresses the false female prophets; then those around him who seek God's word. Finally he addresses true prophets who have been tempted by God not to spread His word; they are a rarity.

"The days grow long and every vision fails" (12:21-28)

¹ This problem is addressed directly Yirmiyahu's struggle with the false prophets in his own environment, in Jerusalem (for example, Yirmiyahu 28).

² This occurs in 12:23, 25 (twice), 28 (twice), 13:2, 3, 8 (twice), 9, 13, 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, 23, 14:4, 6, 8, 11.

The first argument that was commonly used against Yehezkel's prophecy was that, with time, his words would lose their relevance. Here Yehezkel addresses himself not to the bearers of this argument, but rather to their audience, and he emphasizes – twice – that this claim is unsound. Perhaps the reason for its widespread popularity is that rejecting Yehezkel's message in this manner does not require any effort to undermine his authority as a prophet, nor the truth of his arguments. It was enough for these opponents to remind their listeners that warnings as to the Destruction had also been voiced in the past, and the passage of time showed that "that which was, is that which shall be": Jerusalem would not be destroyed, and perhaps – as R. Yishayahu di Trani comments – "all the prophets would be gone before their prophecies would be realized."

This prophetic message is conveyed twice:

	First prophecy: vv. 21-25	Second prophecy: vv. 26-28
Quotation of what the people say	And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Son of man, what is that proverb that you have in the land of Israel, saying, 'The days grow long and every vision fails'?	And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Son of man, behold, they of the house of Israel say, 'The vision that he sees is for many days to come, and he prophesies of times that are far off.'
God's response via the prophet	Tell them therefore, Thus says the Lord God: I will make this proverb to cease, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel; but say to them, <i>The days are at hand, and the word of every vision</i> . For there shall be no more any vain vision nor flattering divination within the house of Israel. For I am the Lord; I will speak, and the word that I shall speak shall come to pass; it shall be no more prolonged, for in your days, O rebellious house, will I say the word, and will perform it, says the Lord God.	Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God: None of My words shall be delayed any more, but the word which I have spoken shall be done, says the Lord God.

The first prophecy is placed in the mouth of those still living in the land; they argue that the prophet's words will no longer be relevant with the passage of time. God's response is that before long their own claim will lose its relevance. The prophecies of the Destruction of Jerusalem will be realized soon, in their own

days. In the face of the people's claim, "The days grow long and every vision fails," the prophet responds, "The days are at hand, and the word of every vision."

The second prophecy quotes a more specific argument raised by "the house of Israel" against Yehezkel. Their argument is a more moderate one: not that nothing will come of his prophecies, but rather that they concern matters that are "for many days to come," that he prophesies "of times that are far off". It is perhaps for this reason that God's response to in this second prophecy is also shorter. The Destruction is imminent: "The word which I have spoken shall be done." In this unit there is no mention of punishment for those who raise the claims against the prophet, because the focus here is on the content of the rebellious message rather than on its bearers. The bearers will be addressed by the prophet in the next unit.

"Those who prophesy out of their own hearts" (13:1-16)

The second group that Yehezkel targets with his words consists of those who claim that their message is prophecy, while in fact they "prophesy out of their own hearts," those "who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing," "they have seen vanity and lying divination." Here, too, the prophetic message is given twice. The first time, Yehezkel addresses himself to the false prophets around him in exile, while the second time he speaks to the false prophets who are in Yehuda.³

Note that Yehezkel calls them "prophets" ("the prophets of Israel that prophesy"; "your prophets, O Israel"). Perhaps they were in fact real prophets who had strayed from the proper path. As individuals with the capability and potential of receiving prophecy from God, they were able to mislead the people. This shows even more clearly how complicated Yehezkel's prophetic mission was. The difficulty in differentiating between true prophets and false ones arose, *inter alia*, from the fact that these were not two completely distinct and separate groups; they were not easily distinguishable from each another.

The false prophets in exile – "They shall not enter the land of Israel" (13:3-9)

In this prophecy Yehezkel compares the false prophets to foxes:

"Your prophets, O Israel, are like foxes among ruins. You have not gone up into the breaches, nor have you built a fence for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the Lord." (13:4-5)

³ We have interpreted the repetition in these prophecies as indicating an orientation to two different audiences, following Kasher's example, p. 295.

Foxes are only rarely mentioned in Tanakh (Shoftim 15:4; Shir Ha-shirim 2:15). This very unusual comparison between a fox, an animal of prey that lives in the desert, and the false prophets, intensifies the prophetic message.

The lamentation that follows the Destruction includes the words, “For Mount Zion that is desolate; foxes walk about on it” (Eikha 5:18). There is a link between this description and Yehezkel’s words before the Destruction about the false prophets. Through their misleading words, the prophets have made themselves like the foxes that would soon wander among the ruins of the Temple. Yehezkel thereby connects the false prophecies with their results.⁴ The imagery of the false prophets as foxes adds a significant dimension to the sight of the fox amongst the ruins that was seared into the Jewish historical memory as the symbol of destruction and of the hoped-for redemption, in the wake of the teaching of Rabbi Akiva.⁵

Over the generations the fox came to symbolize the cause of the Destruction, the Destruction itself, but also the hope of a future redemption and rebuilding.

Judging from Yehezkel’s rebuke, it seems that these prophets could have acted otherwise and helped in the struggle against the lies being disseminated to the people:

“You have not gone up into the breaches, nor have you built a fence for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the Lord” (13:5).

This condemnation supports the explanation that these prophets actually had the potential to convey true prophecy from God to the people. The severity of their lapse lay in that they both prophesied falsely while in the land, but also continued misleading the people after the exile of Yehoyakhin. This is clear from the description of their punishment, which includes languishing in exile:

“And My hand shall be against the prophets that see vanity, and that divine lies; they shall not be in the counsel of My people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord God.” (v. 9)

False prophets in Yehuda – and their annihilation there (13:10-16)

⁴ There are only two more places in Tanakh that mention the fox: Tehillim 63:11, where the fox being a desert animal reinforces the meaning of the psalm, and Nechemia 3:35, where an analogy similar to the one in Yehezkel is made.

⁵ “On another occasion they went up to Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus they tore their garments. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the place of the Holy of Holies and they began to weep, but Rabbi Akiva laughed...” (Makkot 24b). R. Akiva explains that just as the fox now prowling on the Temple Mount represents the fulfillment of the prophecy that Jerusalem would be destroyed, so the prophecies of its rebuilding would now surely be fulfilled, too. His companions respond, “Akiva, you have comforted us.”

In addressing the false prophets in Yehuda (“Because, even because...”) Yehezkel emphasizes the ramifications of their actions, and his accusation seems to be directed towards the false prophets in exile, too. Here Yehezkel uses a parable of a wall to depict them leading the people astray. These prophets build a wall, as it were, and beautify it on the outside. But in fact the wall is built without foundations, and will therefore crumble in a storm.⁶ And then those who seek the wall will not find it, and furthermore, its builders will be buried under the ruins. This image depicts those who create false expectations among the people, and Yehezkel goes on to describe the punishment that awaits them:

“So will I break down the wall that you have daubed with whitewash, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation shall be laid bare, and it shall fall and you shall be consumed in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” (13:14)

The women who prophesy out of their own heart (13:17-23)

The third group that Yehezkel addresses in this series of prophecies consists of “the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own heart”. From the prophecy devoted to them we learn how they operated and their motivation:

“Woe to the women who sew bands upon all arms, and make veils upon the head of people of every height, for hunting souls! Will you hunt the souls of My people, and will you save your own souls alive? And will you profane Me among My people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, to slay the souls that should not die, and to save the souls alive that should not live, by your lying to My people who hear your lies?” (13:18-19)

The false prophetesses beautify themselves in order to “hunt souls”. They “sell” people their future – life or death – in exchange for “handfuls of barley and pieces of bread”. This was a pursuit of monetary gain: the women sold false prophecies and received food in return (through barter, as was common then). But the historical reality of the period, particularly the hunger that represented an existential challenge to all inhabitants of Jerusalem (as we saw in the prophecies in Chapters 4-5) may indicate that the women’s deceptive activity, although unquestionably a grave misdeed, was a desperate attempt to obtain food in the famine-ravaged city, rather than an attempt to make money through deceptive means. Indeed, what they demand in exchange for their “prophecies” is nothing more than “handfuls of barley and pieces of bread,” which would keep them alive.

Either way, God will not allow them to continue to deceive the people. Their garments will be torn and the people caught up in their words will be freed:

⁶ The wording of these verses is complicated. The commentators understand the literal text in a range of different ways, but the underlying prophetic message remains identical.

“... I will tear them from your arms and I will let the souls go free, namely the souls that you hunt, whisking them to destruction. Your head-veils also I will tear, and deliver My people out of your hand, and they shall be no more in your hand to be hunted, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” (13:20-21)

Unlike the male prophets addressed above, who God punishes with annihilation – either in exile or as part of the Destruction – there is no mention of any punishment of the women prophets. This is proof that the women prophets acted out of despair and desperation. The women will be prevented from continuing their false prophecies, in order that the people will not be “hunted,” Yehezkel emphasizes only that they must recognize God.

The seekers of prophecy (14:1-8)

So far Yehezkel has spoken to those who seek out his prophecy – apparently in Babylonia. At this point the series of units dealing with different types of false prophecies is interrupted. But the response that God conveys via Yehezkel to those who come to listen to him indicates that even those who recognized Yehezkel as a true prophet and came to hear the word of God from him, would not merit to hear any true prophecy, because of their betrayal of God.⁷ This leads us to the conclusion that there are two preconditions to hearing a prophecy from God: first, of course, avoiding false prophets and resisting their temptations; second, as we learn from this chapter, the seekers of prophecy can only approach the prophet if they themselves are innocent. They will receive no message from God if, at the same time, they serve idols. Yehezkel describes: “Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me” (14:1). The identity of these “elders of Israel” is not made clear,⁸ but unlike the description of the Divine vision that Yehezkel experiences when the “elders of Yehuda” are before him, in Chapter 8, here the elders’ request is denied (as in the appeal of the elders in Chapter 20, verses 1-4), because of their sins:

“And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces; should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them?” (14:2-3)

⁷ The language of the verses in this chapter resembles the language in Vayikra 17 and 20. Here, as in Chapters 6 and 8 above, the similarity of language is meant to indicate the severity of the actions of the people. (In our earlier discussion, we noted that this technique serves to reinforce the prophetic message.)

⁸ Y. Moskowitz describes them thus: “But their approach is hesitant; their voice is inaudible, their request is unclear and in their heart of hearts they also serve idols, as though seeking to assure themselves assistance from every possible source.” (Moskowitz, chapter 3, p. 80, n. 5.)

In other words, why should people who worship idols merit hearing the word of God? Nevertheless, they are not simply ignored and rejected; they are rebuked for their actions:

“Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: every man of the house of Israel that sets up his idols in his heart, and puts the stumbling-block of his iniquity before his face, and comes to the prophet – I the Lord will answer him that comes with the multitude of his idols, that I may catch the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from Me through their idols.” (14:4-5)

Notably, and uniquely in this Book, Yehezkel calls upon them to repent – perhaps because these people have, after all, come to hear God’s word from the prophet:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations.” (v. 6)

The punishment for those who come to seek God’s word while still serving idols will be harsh:

“I will set My face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” (v. 8)

Like the false prophets, they will be “cut off from the midst of the people”. This is another indication of the severity of the elders’ dual loyalty.

“A prophet who is tempted,” and conclusion (14:9-11)

Finally, we are told of a rather surprising group: prophets who have been tempted by God to mislead the people with their words. In contrast to the false prophets who “prophesied out of their own hearts,” this last group has been guided by God Himself:

“And if the prophet be deceived when he has spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet...” (14:9)

The existence of this group raises the obvious question: how can Yehezkel blame prophets whom God has caused to speak falsely? And how are the people supposed to know that they are not speaking the truth? The commentators offer different solutions to this question. Rashi explains:

“I allowed him an opening in whichever direction he chose. Hence we must say – if he came with impure intent, the way is open to him.”

Thus, God's tempting of the prophet is, in fact, part of his punishment. A similar interpretation is offered by R. Eliezer of Beaugency:

"I the Lord have deceived...' – in other words, having already made known to him the nature of the wicked one who comes seeking his word, I test him without offering any further warning or caution. I allow him to be tempted by him, and then I will punish him."

In contrast, R. Yosef Kara explains that it is not God Who tempts the prophet to speak falsely:

"He says something that he did not hear from He, and the people listen to him. 'I the Lord have deceived that prophet' – for he comes to tempt My people, so he finds himself being tempted. How do I tempt him? As the verse says later on: 'I will stretch out My hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of My people Israel.'"⁹

These prophets, too, will be punished with annihilation:

"I will stretch out My hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of My people Israel." (14:9)

Verses 10-11 are a continuation of the unit concerning the prophet who is tempted, but also a conclusion of the series of units dealing with prophets and prophecies:

"And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeks to him; that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, neither be defiled any more by all their transgressions..."

Thus we learn that the people will be punished along with their prophets, so long as they come and seek God's words while still sinning.

Nevertheless, this series of prophetic units concludes with the covenantal formula:

"...but that they may be My people, and I may be their God, says the Lord God." (14:11)

This is the second time since the beginning of the Book (the first instance was in 11:20) that the prophet concludes by emphasizing the bond between God and

⁹ See also the interpretations of Radak, R. Menachem ben Shimon, R. Yishayahu di Trani, and especially R. Yosef Kaspi, who concludes his comment here with the words, "And all these matters are tremendous secrets that it would not be proper to explain in this book."

His people. In both instances this formula follows a harsh prophecy, which brings some measure of consolation.

Translated by Kaeren Fish