

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yechezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
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**Shiur #16a: The Beginning of the End:
 God's Sword in the Hand of the King of Babylon (Chapter 21)**

The series of prophecies in Chapter 21 which describe the end of the Kingdom of Yehuda seem to have been uttered in close proximity to the laying of the siege on Jerusalem on the 10th of Tevet. Whereas chapter 19, dealing with the fate of the kings of Yehuda, did not mention God's Name at all, our chapter – in stark contrast – mentions God's Name fifteen times (!), in different forms (“the word of the Lord,” “So says the Lord,” etc.). This emphasis is meant to counter the popular perception – prevalent in pagan thought – that God would not destroy His own land, and to emphasize the events will come about by God's will.

The sword has been drawn (21:1-10)

Yechezkel begins the chapter by addressing himself to the south. He does so as a parable, but the people apparently do not understand the parable (or they understand it but refuse to accept and internalize its message). So Yechezkel repeats his prophecy, this time explicitly addressing Jerusalem:

Verses 2-4	Verses 7-10
“Son of man, set your face towards the south, and preach towards the south, and prophesy against the forest land of the Negev;	“Son of man, set your face towards Jerusalem, and preach towards the holy places, and prophesy against the land of Israel. ¹
And say to the forest of the Negev: Hear the word of the Lord; Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it will devour every green tree in you, and every dry tree; it shall not be quenched; it shall be a flaming flame, and all faces from the Negev northwards shall be scorched by it.	And say to the land of Israel: Thus says the Lord; Behold, I am against you, and will draw My sword out of its sheath, and will cut off from you the righteous and the wicked. Seeing then that I will cut off from you the righteous and the wicked, therefore My sword shall go out of its sheath, against all flesh from the south to the north,

¹ The text creates a parallel among three descriptions of place: “Jerusalem”, “the holy places” (*mikdashim*), and “the land of Israel”. Since it appears more appropriate that a comparison be drawn between different geographical places, rather than between an area and a structure, the expression “*mikdashim*” should be understood as the sanctified area in general, rather than specifically referring to the Temple.

And all flesh shall see that I the Lord have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.	that all flesh may know that I the Lord have drawn My sword out of its sheath; it shall not return any more.”
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The nation’s response to the first part of the prophecy is disbelieving: “Then I said, Ah, Lord God! They say of me, Does he not speak in allegories?” (v. 5)

Following the more explicit prophecy addressed to Jerusalem, the prophet adds his own response, by God’s command:

“Sigh therefore, son of man; with the breaking of your loins, and with bitterness sigh before their eyes. And it shall be, when they say to you, Why do you sigh? Then you shall answer, For the tidings, because it comes; and every heart shall melt, and all hands shall be feeble, and every spirit shall faint, and all knees shall drip with water. Behold, it comes, and shall be brought to pass, says the Lord God.” (vv. 11-12)

The prophet’s reaction to the events underlines the immediacy with which they are about to occur.

“A sword, a sword” (21:13-22)

The next prophetic unit deals with the sword of the king of Babylon, and describes the campaign of conquest approaching Jerusalem. The verses are difficult to translate and explain literally, as Shadal writes in his commentary on verses 15 and 18:

“Ultimately, we understand nothing of all of this allegory (v. 15). This verse and the later on (v. 18) are examples of verses concerning which Ben Zeev describes (in his Introduction²) as incomprehensible and unintelligible [...]. And the commentators and scholars despair of seeking their meaning. Despite all their forced and roundabout attempts at elucidation, it (the verse) remains as unreachable as before, enveloped in mist and cloud and surrounded by a darkness so thick that it is almost tangible....”

As an example of the difficulty in explaining this chapter, we find the following statement by Rashi, commenting on v. 18:

“”I have heard various interpretations of it, and have seen explanations in the Sifri, but to my mind they do not resolve the text.”

For this reason, we shall not attempt a continuous literal elucidation of the verses, but rather focus on the prophetic message on the eve of the destruction, which Yechezkel repeats here once again: Jerusalem will not be saved; not only that but the city is about to suffer a large-scale massacre, and

² Y. L. Ben-Zeev, *Mavo el Mikraei Kodesh*, Vienna 1810. Ben-Zeev was one of the first to accept some of the conclusions of modern biblical criticism.

the sword that slaughters will do so in the agency of God. This sword, which has been mentioned previously (6:11-12; 12:16; 14:17) now returns with even greater emphasis (eight appearances in these verses), with the prophet stating in each instance that the sword is ready to slaughter (the inhabitants of Jerusalem):

“A sword, a sword is sharpened, and also polished. It is sharpened to make a terrible slaughter; it is polished that it may glitter... And He has given it to be polished, that it may be handled; this sword is sharpened, and it is polished, to give it into the hand of the slayer” (21:14-16).

Along with the sword there are the cries of lamentation (“Cry and howl, son of man” – v. 17), and expressions of sorrow (“Smite upon your thigh” – *ibid.*, “smite your hands together” – v. 19) on the part of Yechezkel, as well as the fear on the part of the nation in view of the approaching sword (“Terrors by reason of the sword shall be upon My people” – v. 17; “That their heart may melt” – v. 20). This sword is “the mother of all swords” (“The sword of the slain, it is the sword of the great slaughter” – v. 19) and it does not pass over anyone, neither to the right nor to the left (“Take yourself one way or the other, either to the right hand, or to the left” – v. 21). Ultimately, God’s wrath will subside, with an echo of His sorrow (“I will also smite My hands together, and I will relieve My anger” – v. 22).

The King of Babylon (21:23-32)

Now the prophet addresses the sword of the king of Babylon. The proximity of these two units seems to highlight the idea that the sword of the king of Babylon is none other than the sword of God, in Whose agency the king is acting.

“Also, you, son of man, appoint yourself two ways, that the sword of the king of Babylon may come: the two of them shall come out of one land. And construct a signpost, construct it at the head of the way to the city. Appoint a way, that the sword may come to Rabba of Ammon, and to Yehuda in Jerusalem, fortified though it is. For the king of Babylon stood at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways to use divination; he shook the arrows, he consulted the *terafim*, he looked in the liver. At his right hand was the divination for Jerusalem, to set battering rams, to open the mouth for the slaughter, to lift up the voice with shouting, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up a mound, to build a fort. And it shall be to them as a false divination in their sight (they have word oaths to this effect) but it brings their iniquity to remembrance, that they may be taken.” (21:24-28)

In verses 23-32, the prophet describes the military campaign of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, at the conclusion of which Jerusalem is conquered. In previous chapters we discussed Tzidkiyahu in light of Chapters 12 and 17, and noted that the potential for renewal of the monarchy in Israel lies with those exiled to Babylonia. We have also discussed the fate of the kings of Yehuda according to Chapter 19, and there we addressed the verses

in our chapter that speak of the fate of Tzidkiyahu. We will now provide the political background in the Land of Israel and in Babylonia at the time these prophecies were uttered, with a discussion of the identity of Nevukhadnetzar.

To be continued...