

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
By Dr. Tova Ganzel

Dedicated le-ilui nishmat Henri Sueke z”l
R’ Moshe ben Yaakov and Shoshana,

Shiur #16b: The Beginning of the End:
God’s Sword in the Hand of the King of Babylon (Chapter 21)
(Part 2 of 2)

Historical background¹

Nevukhadnetzar (sometimes referred to in Tanakh as Nevukhadretzar) II (630-562 B.C.E.), son of Nevopolassar, ascended the throne in the year 605 B.C.E., during the reign of Yehoyakim (609-598 B.C.E.). He headed the Babylonian army in the battle of Karkemish against Egypt (*Yirmiyahu* 46:2). A few months after the battle, his father, Nevopolassar, died, and Nevukhadnetzar hurried back to the Babylonia, where he ascended the throne. Immediately upon his coronation Yirmiyahu describes him as “Nevukhadneetzar, king of Babylon, My servant” (*Yirmiyahu* 25:9), and expresses opposition to anyone who does not accept the new king’s authority (*Yirmiyahu* 25). In the winter of the year 604 B.C.E., Nevukhadnetzar’s army conquered Ashkelon and took its king into captivity.² It would appear that in the year 601 B.C.E. Nevukhadnetzar fought against the king of Egypt in a war that depleted both forces, and thereafter Nevukhadnetzar devoted himself to rehabilitating his army. This, it seems, was the moment that Yehoyakim picked to rebel against Nevukhadnetzar (*Melakhim* II 24:1). In 597 B.C.E. Nevukhadnetzar laid siege to Jerusalem in response to this rebellion, but Yehoyakim seems to have died before the siege.

After Yehoyakim’s death, his son Yehoyakhin ascended the throne. Three months later, he surrendered himself to the king of Babylonia (*Yirmiyahu* 22; *Melakhim* 24:12). Nevukhadnetzar exiled him to Babylonia, along with his family and the dignitaries of Jerusalem (including Yehezkel), and made Tzidkiyahu king in his stead. Tzidkiyahu’s rebellion against Nevukhadnetzar, against which

¹ The historical information here is taken from B.T. Arnold, *Who Were the Babylonians?*, Atlanta 2004, pp. 91-99.

² These events made an impression in Jerusalem, too, and perhaps their echo may be detected in *Melakhim* II 24:1, 7. This may also be the reason for the calling of “a fast before the Lord” the following year (*Yirmiyahu* 36:9).

Yehezkel rails in Chapter 17 (see also *Yirmiyahu* 27), appears to have taken place in the year 595 B.C.E.³ In response, Nevukhadnetzar once again laid siege to Jerusalem, starting on the 10th of Tevet in the 9th year of Tzidkiyahu (*Melakhim* II 25:1; *Yirmiyahu* 39:1; *Yehezkel* 24:1-2; this took place in the year 587 B.C.E.) and lasting until the 9th of Av in the 11th year of his reign (*Melakhim* II 25:3-4; the summer of 586 B.C.E.).

There are various estimates of the number of Jews exiled at the time of the destruction of the Temple, but a remnant was left behind. This remnant rebelled once again against Nevukhadnetzar in 582 B.C.E. Because of this rebellion, this remnant too was expelled (described in *Yirmiyahu* 52:30). Nevukhadnetzar's imperialistic aspirations did not end with the conquest of Jerusalem; indications of this are evident in Yehezkel's prophecy to Tyre, and later in the prophecy to Egypt (Chapter 29:17-21), which is the latest prophecy in *Sefer Yehezkel* (570 B.C.E.). We will discuss these prophecies later on.

“To use divination; he shook the arrows, he consulted the *terafim*, he look in the liver” (21:26)

The king of Babylonia used the magical practices of the time to decide whether to advance his army towards Jerusalem or Rabbat Ammon. The “shaking of arrows” consists of

“filling a quiver with arrows, with different answers written on them. The diviner would shake the arrows, and the first to fall from the quiver was considered to represent the answer of the gods.”⁴

In addition, the king “consulted the *terafim*” – meaning, divining the future using idols (see *Bereishit* 31:34; *Melakhim* II 23:24; *Zekharia* 10:2).

What is particularly interesting is that he “looked in the liver”. This corresponds to archaeological and textual evidence about people “looking in the liver” – namely, they would divine the future and their fate in accordance with the state of a liver taken from an animal that was offered as a sacrifice. (This custom is mentioned in *Kohelet Rabba* 12:7.) Ettie Koryat-Aharon writes about a finding from Megido:

³ Since the Babylonian chronicle breaks off in the 11th year of Nevukhadnetzar, the exact year of the rebellion is unknown.

⁴ Kasher, p. 426. It is interesting to note Shadal's commentary on v. 26: “*kilkel ba-chitzim*’ – this means ‘shaking’ them, in Arabic... This is one of the ways of casting lots, and this was the custom of the Arabs when in doubt as to whether or not to follow a certain course of action: they would take three arrows. On one they would write, ‘My master has commanded me’; on the second – ‘My master forbids me’, and the third was left unmarked. They would then shake them in a container. If the first came up, they would do whatever the action was. If the second came up, they would refrain. If the third came up, they would return the arrow to the container, until one of the other two appeared.” (p. 165)

“It seems that the custom of ‘looking in the liver’ is based on the idea that the liver, as the seat of the psyche, reflects the psyche of the god who receives the sacrifice, and divining through the liver of the sacrifice may reveal the god’s hidden desire. The discovery of the form of a liver, discovered in Megido, shed light on the process of this ‘looking’, which was performed by a priest, starting with an examination of the innards of the animal (usually the liver), following which the liver was separated from the other organs and placed upon the palm of the priest’s left hand or upon the altar. The priest would then look closely at the liver and, depending on its shape and the lines that had formed in it, would divine or resolve a certain question. In order to teach priests this technique, the various appearance of the liver were copied on tin molds, and sometimes explanations were even engraved in handwriting on these molds. [Such] tin molds have been found in many archaeological sites throughout the Ancient East.”⁵

Ammon – temporary salvation (21:34-37)

The chapter concludes with a prophecy addressed to the children of Ammon, foretelling its imminent demise as well. The prophet starts with Jerusalem and then moves on to Ammon; while Jerusalem precedes Ammon, it does not replace it. The language of this prophecy recalls that used towards Jerusalem both in this chapter and also elsewhere:

“A sword, a sword is drawn, for the slaughter it is polished, for grasping, that it may glitter, while they see false visions for you, while they divine lies about you, to bring you down on the necks of the slain, the wicked, whose day has come, when their iniquity shall have an end. Return it to its sheath! I will judge you in the place where you were created, in the land of your nativity. And I will pour out My indignation upon you; I will blow against you with the fire of My wrath, and deliver you into the hand of brutish men, skilled in destruction. You shall be for fuel to the fire; your blood shall be in the midst of the land; you shall be no more remembered...” (21:33-37)

The “sword,” the “slaughter” and “divining” are all reminiscent of the prophecy earlier in the chapter; the “end,” the “sheath,” the “fire” and the “blood” appear in other chapters where Yehezkel prophesies the city’s impending destruction. The linguistic similarity between his prophecy to Jerusalem and his prophecies to other nations does not appear to be coincidental. We will discuss this further in the chapters addressed to the nations.

Appendix: The status of Nevukhadnetzar in Yehezkel’s prophecies

⁵ E. Koryat-Aharon, “Mamlekhet ha-Ir Megido”, *Moreshet Derekh*, Nov. 2001, p. 95.

Yehezkel's perception of the role of Nevukhadnetzar is different from the conventional view found mainly in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu. Yirmiyahu sees Nevukhadnetzar as God's emissary, charged with implementing His universal decrees among the nations, including Yehuda. In contrast, Yehezkel views Nevukhadnetzar as a tool in God's hand, but in a more limited role. Nevukhadnetzar is sent by God to punish Am Yisrael for their sins and for their violation of their covenant with God, which have led to a desecration of God's Name (17:11-14).

But Babylonia also conquered the nations that rejoiced over Israel's destruction. So in our chapter Nevukhadnetzar first chooses Jerusalem, but then turns to the children of Ammon, who had cursed Israel and celebrated their downfall. These justifications for punishment are different from those set down by Yirmiyahu, whose prophecy to Nevukhadnetzar (whom he calls "God's servant") broadens his role as God's emissary (Yirmiyahu 27:6-7). Yirmiyahu also predicts that after the conquest of Jerusalem, the sins of Babylonia will bring about its own downfall (Yirmiyahu 50-51), while Yehezkel does not prophesy about the end of Nevukhadnetzar or the end of the Babylonians.⁶

Yehezkel's silence is even more noteworthy when we compare Yehezkel's attitude towards Babylonia and that of Yirmiyahu. Yirmiyahu calls upon Am Yisrael to place the reins of power in the hands of the Babylonians for seventy years (Chapter 25) and prophesies that instead of banding together with a view to rebelling, the people should submit to Babylonian rule (Chapter 27) and even deepen their ties with Babylonia. These prophecies are uttered as part of his struggle against representatives of the Jewish leadership (Chapter 36) and the false prophets in his own environs (Chapter 28), who believe that the exiles in Babylonia will be back in their land within two years (Chapter 29). The prophecies of Yehezkel, who now dwells in Babylonia, say nothing on this subject.

Life in the Babylonian exile, according to extra-biblical sources⁷

There are a considerable number of well-known extra-biblical sources from the time of Nevukhadnetzar. There is a Babylonian chronicle that records the surrender of the Kingdom of Yehuda to Babylonia in the seventh year of the king;⁸ a list of the members of his court, with Nevuzaradan (Accadian: Nabû-

⁶ This paragraph is based on a dissertation entitled, "Tafkido shel Nevukhadnetzar Melekh Bavel ve-Sofo", submitted by Yosef Yalon z"l for a course on "Yirmiyahu and Yehezkel – Similarities and Contrasts", taught by Rimon Kasher, in March 2004.

⁷ See: K. Abraham, "The Reconstruction of Jewish Communities in the Persian Empire: The Al-Yahudu Clay Tablets", in: H. Segev and A. Schor (eds.), *Light and Shadows – The Catalog – The Story of Iran and the Jews*, Tel Aviv, 2001, pp. 264-268. My thanks to Prof. Abraham for all her help in writing this Appendix.

⁸ See: M. Kogan, *A Collection of Historical Inscriptions from Assyria and Babylonia: 9th-6th Centuries B.C.E.* [Heb], Jerusalem 5764, Inscription 41, pp. 130-135.

šarrūssu-ukīn) appearing in second place;⁹ and administrative lists that were discovered in the palace of Nevukhadnetzar in Babylonia, in which Yehoyakhin appears, with his title “King of Yehuda,” along with his sons and eight of his men, as receiving allowances of oil from the king’s treasury.¹⁰ In recent years, additional sources have come to light.

The primary source for research on the day-to-day life of the Jews in Babylonia in ancient times are the hundreds of private legal documents from Babylonia that are still extant, mostly in the Murasu Archive. This archive belonged to people with Jewish names that appear in the documents, occupying different statuses (as parties to contracts and/or as witnesses to them), and thus we may conclude that they were free men. Thus far some 163 Jewish names have been identified in Babylonian documents.¹¹ Another important archive that made its appearance in antiquities scholarship in the late 1990s is the Al-Yahudu Archive, which sheds new light on the daily life of the exiles. The archive includes some 200 legal documents, including promissory notes, tenancies, sales of agricultural merchandise, and receipts for various payments such as rental and taxes. These documents are uniquely valuable owing to the fact that they date back further than those of the Murasu Archive. The earliest document in the Al-Yahudu Archive is from 572 B.C.E., about 25 years after the first exile. In addition, the region in question had a relatively dense Jewish population: 15% of all the names appearing in the Archive are Jews, including Achikam and his family.¹² This evidence leads us to conclude that the Jews adapted well to the local customs and internalized Babylonian legal procedures. Their Jewish origins appear not to have influenced either the formulation or the content of the legal documents written in their name. Despite all of this, the members of this exiled community maintained their Jewish names, even after nearly a hundred years had passed since the first exile from Yehuda. They were absorbed into the local economy and engaged, for the most part, in agriculture, but did not become especially wealthy.

⁹ Nevuzaradan, the Chief Eunuch (in Accadian: rab ša rēši) is listed as having sent a quantity of gold with a eunuch to the temple of the god Marduk in Babylonia. Confirmation of receipt in the presence of two witnesses is recorded on the 18th of Shevat in the 10th year of Nevukhadnetzar (595 B.C.E.). Tablet publicized by M. Jursa (*Nabu* 2008-5).

¹⁰ See: M.W. Chavalas (ed.), *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation*, Malden, 2006, pp. 387-388.

¹¹ An individual appearing in a Babylonian document is considered Jewish when his first name includes the Name of God. Each of the Babylonia documents is dated, and thus we are able to trace the Jews of Babylonia from 582 B.C.E. until 350 B.C.E. Since each document also notes the place where it was written, we are also able to trace their geographic distribution throughout Babylonia. See: R. Zadok, “The Jews in Babylonia During the Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods According to the Babylonian Sources”, in: *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* 3, Haifa 1979; idem, *The Earliest Diaspora: Israelites and Judeans in Pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia*, Tel Aviv 2002. In Hebrew, see: O Bustenay, *Early History of the Babylonian Exile - 8th-6th centuries B.C.E.* [Heb.], Haifa 5770.

¹² K. Abraham, “An Inheritance Division Among Judeans in Babylonia from the Early Persian Period”, in: M. Lubetski (ed.), *New Seals and Inscriptions, Hebrew, Idumean and Cuneiform* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 8), Sheffield 2007, pp. 206-221.

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