

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
By Dr. Tova Ganzel

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman
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לע"נ
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ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

Shiur #20: Prophecies to Egypt (29-32)

Egypt's long-term stability in the region, its geographic proximity, and its historic connection with Israel form the foundation of Yehezkel's prophecies to this country. The prophet points an accusing finger at Egypt in three areas:

1. The first and most central accusation, common to Tzor and Egypt, is the sin of arrogance towards God. The kings of Tzor and of Egypt attribute their successes to themselves. They pride themselves on their successes, boast about them, and scorn the God of Israel (Tzor - 27:3; 28:2; Egypt – 29:9; 31:2). Yehezkel therefore emphasizes God's rule: even when the Temple is in ruins and God's nation is exiled, it is God Who determines the fate of all nations, including Egypt, and its king.
2. The second accusation concerns the pride of the king of Egypt for his political successes. The essence of this prophecy is directed towards the king of Egypt (Pharaoh Apries) who, during this period, exerted great efforts to banish Babylonian influence from the area. He wanted Jerusalem to join him in his rebellion against Babylon.¹ So we find at the beginning of the prophecy (vv. 6-9) that the backing the Pharaoh gave to the rebellion against the king of Babylon is what prompted the prophecy of punishment. In fact, this was a period when Egypt hoped to become a superpower with influence beyond the region, following the fall of Assyria and prior to Babylon reaching its zenith. Yehezkel's prophecies put an end to this possibility, not only in the worldly realm, but also from the

¹ See Kahn (#16, n. 3).

Divine perspective. From now onwards, as in the past, Egypt will be a “lowly kingdom,” not an empire.

3. Finally, Egypt is accused of the religious harlotry that infiltrated Israel.

All three issues are part of the joint history of Egypt and Israel that goes back to the period of Israelite slavery. In describing the faithlessness of the city, Yehezkel describes Jerusalem as having played the harlot with Egypt, as part of its betrayal of God (16:26; 23:3, 8, 19, 21, 27), and the deeds of the people are described as “the abominations of Egypt” (*gilulei mitzrayim*) (20:7, 18). On the other hand, their common history also includes more positive elements: Egypt is the “furnace” in which Am Yisrael was forged and the place of God’s revelation to His people (20:5-6), the place from which He brought them out for His Name’s sake (20:9-10, 36).

Dates of the prophecies

In Yehezkel’s prophecy to Egypt he notes many different dates. The inclusion of these days may be serving attest to Yehezkel’s status even before the Destruction: they emphasize that Yehezkel prophesied, in advance, that Egypt would fall into the hands of Nevukhadnetzar, at a time when such a scenario seemed impossible to the exiles.

29:1-16 – According to the date at the beginning of the prophecy, it was uttered during the tenth year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, on the 12th of Tevet. This means that it came at the beginning of the year 587 B.C.E., a year after the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem, and about a year prior to the Destruction. Some scholars connect the date of this prophecy recorded in Yirmiyahu 27:5 – “Then Pharaoh’s army came out of Egypt, and when the Kasdim that besieged Jerusalem heard tidings of them, they departed from Jerusalem.” If so, then Yehezkel, like Yirmiyahu, was speaking out against relying on Egyptian power,² even though the Egyptian intervention was not leading to the removal of the Babylonian siege on the city, at least for a short time. Nevertheless, Yehezkel does not explicitly mention Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, as the figure who will punish Egypt (29:19; 30:10, 24-25; 32:11) for its intervention in Yehuda during the years of the siege on Jerusalem. And indeed – Egypt was not ultimately conquered by the Babylonians.

29:17-21 – Here (as we have noted previously) we find the latest date mentioned in *Sefer Yehezkel*. The content of this prophecy is rather unusual: Egypt will be given into the hand of the king of Babylon as recompense for Tzor not having fallen into his hands. While the might of Tzor is described at length, we have seen that the prophecy concerning Egypt cancels, to some extent, Yehezkel’s previous prophecy of punishment to Tzor, where he foretold that it would fall to the Babylonians. Indeed, according to historical records, the Babylonian siege on Tzor continued for thirteen years (585-572 B.C.E.) and

² See: Kasher (see #19, n. 5) p. 570

concluded without a conquest by Nevukhadnetzar, such that in effect there was no clear outcome. However, even this “alternative” prophecy presents a problem: according to the historical records, Yehezkel’s prophecy was not realized. Babylon never actually conquered Egypt; Egypt was conquered for the first time only in the year 525, by Cambyses.

30:20 – The date of this prophecy is about four months prior to the Destruction. Indeed, its content fits this date. It is possible that this prophecy (v. 21) is meant to complement Yirmiyahu’s description (34:21) of Pharaoh emerging to help Jerusalem, but suffering defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. Against the background of this defeat, Yehezkel foretells an even greater downfall for Egypt in the future (vv. 22-25), and consequently, Egypt is unable to save Jerusalem from the Babylonians.

31:1 – This prophecy is uttered about two months after the previous one, with another two months left until the Destruction. It includes within it God’s message both to Bnei Yisrael and to the nations in anticipation of the Destruction: even though what is happening to God’s people and His land now causes the kings and their gods to be arrogant, their pride will be short-lived, and they will eventually go down to Sheol.

The great crocodile and its downfall³

29:3-9; 32:1-16 – The king of Egypt is compared to a crocodile that is captured by God, and his Nile dried up (29:10; 32:2-3). This description engages in covert polemic against the ancient Egyptian belief in the crocodile as one of the major gods in the Egyptian pantheon. Extra-biblical sources speak of worship of the crocodile in Egypt, including sanctifying it during its life and embalming and burying it in special cemeteries after death. In addition, these sources present an image of the king of Egypt as a crocodile ruling over the rivers of Egypt, as the god who created the rivers, and even as having created himself. Thus, Yehezkel combines the crocodile who was part of the Egyptian natural environment with the crocodile as a mythological creature. The prophecy concludes with a graphic description of the quiet and barrenness after the Nile subsides (32:13-14).

The Day of God and the downfall of Egypt (30-32)

In these chapters, the downfall of Egypt is described as part of a broader system of events. The imminent “day of the Lord” (30:2-3) is the definitive moment, and it comes about through Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon (30:10).⁴ The fact that the prophecy about the Day of the Lord is the only prophetic unit in this series that is not introduced by any date, perhaps conveys the message that

³ See Y. Breslavi, “Sofu shel Paro: HaTanim haGadol le-Or Pulchan ha-Tanim be-Mitzrayim (Yechezkel 29:32)”, *Beit Mikra* 18, 5733, pp. 143-149

⁴ For more on the Day of the Lord in *Sefer Yechezkel*, see Kasher, Appendix H: The Day of the Lord in Yechezkel in Comparison with the Other Prophetic Books, pp. 589-590.

the “day of the Lord” is beyond time. Thereafter, the prophecy describes the inhabitants dying by the sword, the Nile drying up, and Egypt with all its cities being left desolate.

The description of the destruction of Egypt (30:13-19) is emphasized through the group of thirteen verbs comprising the message in these six verses: “I will destroy,” “I will put an end,” “there shall be no more,” “I will make desolate,” “I will set fire,” “I will execute judgments,” “I will pour My fury,” “I will cut off,” “I will set a fire,” “agony,” “rent asunder,” “fall by the sword,” “go into captivity,” “I will execute judgments.”⁵ There are different elements emphasized in the repeated descriptions, in various prophecies, of the fall of Egypt: first there is military defeat (30:2—26), depicted as the “breaking of the arm” of its king (30:21, 22, 24, 25) as opposed to the “strengthening of the arm” of the king of Babylon (30:24, 25); afterwards there is the loss of its status, the cancelling of its pride, and its descent to Sheol (31). These aspects arise from within the interweaving of analogy and interpretation in depicting the trees of the “garden of the Lord” (31:8), “the trees of Eden that were in the garden of God” (31:9), “the trees of Eden” (31:16, 18), and contrasting them with the pagan “Sheol” that awaits Egypt. There is also lamentation over the death of the crocodile (32:1-16), symbolizing the fall of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, which is now placed in even sharper focus through the contrast between God’s power and Pharaoh’s nothingness. Finally, there is a description of Pharaoh’s own descent to Sheol (32:17-32).

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁵ See M. Greenberg, *Yechezkel 21-37* (see # 9, n. 8), p. 628