YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

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**Shiur #09: The Period of Yarovam, Uziyahu, Pekach, and Achaz (2)**

**In the face of an ascendant Assyria[[1]](#footnote-1)**

About a hundred years prior to Amos and Yeshayahu, in the time of Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.E.),[[2]](#footnote-2) the Assyrian army fortified its chariots with a powerful cavalry. This put an end to the ambushes that had earlier been set up at difficult mountain passes, river crossings,[[3]](#footnote-3) or straits (narrow waterways), where there was little room to maneuver. The horsemen arranged themselves alongside and ahead of the chariots, such that jointly they formed an indomitable strike force.

Yeshayahu’s precise description of military conquest leaves no reasonable room to doubt that he is talking about the ascendant Assyrian army. In addition, the expression “nations from far… from the end of the earth”[[4]](#footnote-4) indicates a powerful army, with soldiers from many different “nations” together forming a large military host.

Ashurnasirpal II was succeeded by his son, Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.E.),[[5]](#footnote-5) who launched military campaigns southward, beyond the Euphrates, towards Aram (Syria), Lebanon, and the Phoenician coast. In a mighty multi-national effort to halt Shalmaneser, a coalition of twelve kings was formed, led by Hadadezer of Damesek, Irchuleni of Chamat, and “Achav the Israelite” (who was the strongest of all).[[6]](#footnote-6) The decisive battle (853 B.C.E.) was fought on the plain of Karkar (in northern Syria).

The only details known to us are from the Shalmaneser monolith,[[7]](#footnote-7) which describes (unsurprisingly) a resounding Assyrian victory. However, it is clear that Shalmaneser did not proceed further southward in his campaign; he was forced to wage at least another three battles against the war alliance of the twelve kings. It was twelve years before he reappeared in Damesek and the mountains of Lebanon, as well as in Tyre and Sidon. During those years, the great coalition fell apart;[[8]](#footnote-8) Israel and Aram resumed their fighting, Achav was killed in Ramot Gil’ad, and Chazael seized power in Damesek and Yehu in Shomron. They were certainly incapable of stopping the Assyrian charge. The stele also describes a messenger of “Yehu, son of Omri”[[9]](#footnote-9) prostrating himself before Shalmaneser and offering a tribute of submission (841 B.C.E.)

At this stage, conflict developed on the north-western border of Assyria, against the kingdom of Ararat (Urartu),[[10]](#footnote-10) and Assyrian forces desisted[[11]](#footnote-11) from venturing southward for nearly a hundred years. It was these years that witnessed the flourishing of Aram Damesek under Chazael, and later the flourishing of the kingdom of Israel under Yoash and Yarovam, his son, with their great victories.

Most of the inhabitants of Shomron and Yehuda were apparently convinced that the Assyrian threat had passed. Assyria itself was plagued by acute internal strife. Few people understood the warnings of Amos and Yeshayahu that ignoring the Assyrian build-up was dangerous, especially in conjunction with the decadent partying and growing corruption in Israel.

**The ascent of Tiglat-Pileser III**[[12]](#footnote-12)

The next king to rule in Kalhu (the capital of Assyria) was Tiglat-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.E.), a military man who appears to have been a member of the royal family. He ushered in a new era in Assyrian history, introducing fundamental change in the kingdom’s civil and military systems, and creating a sophisticated bureaucracy that included courier services for letters and information throughout the kingdom. He renewed and realized the dream of a great Assyrian empire, which ruled over Babylon in the south-east and Aram, Lebanon, and Israel in the south-west, and aspired to world dominion.[[13]](#footnote-13)

***Hoshea* (Chapters 5-6), *Yeshayahu* (Chapters 7-12), and *Mikha* (Chapters 6-7)**

**In the face of the Assyrian ascent**

After a string of victories over a few years in the east and the north, Tiglat-Pileser returned his focus to the west, attacking Arpad and Chamat (743-740 B.C.E.) in northern Syria, and afterwards Damesek and Israel in the south. One of the Assyrian Dedicatory Inscriptions (dating to 738 B.C.E.)[[14]](#footnote-14) describes a rebellion of the nations of this area against Tiglat-Pileser. There is no description of how the rebellion began, but by comparing the relevant biblical verses and a reading of the list of kings who gave tribute to Assyria, we may deduce that it included the kings of Mount Lebanon, Mount Amana (Hermon), the coastal cities, Byblos (Geval), Tyre, Chamat, Arpad, Karkemish, Retzin of Damesek, and Menachem of Shomron (see below). According to the inscriptions, a certain "Azriya’u" was one of the leaders of the rebellion. This sounds like a reference to a king of Israel or Yehuda, and the most likely candidate, considering the period,[[15]](#footnote-15) is Uziyahu, king of Yehuda, who is referred to in Tanakh by both names - Azaryahu and Uziyahu.[[16]](#footnote-16)

But no king, and no alliance of kings, could stand up to Tiglat-Pileser, who conquered nation after nation "as one gathers eggs that are forsaken."[[17]](#footnote-17) Recognition of Assyrian dominance in the region is reflected in the list of kings who offered tribute to Tiglat-Pileser (in 738 B.C.E.).

In the next stage of his campaign, Tiglat-Pileser went southward, towards Egypt, with Aram-Damesek and the kingdom of Israel as additional objectives along the way. In his third campaign (734-732 B.C.E.),[[18]](#footnote-18) he conquered Damesek and defeated Shomron and the Philistine cities, thus subjugating the entire region (up to Egypt) to Assyrian rule.

At this point (when Amos was no longer active), we hear a very different message from Yeshayahu (from Chapter 7 onwards, in contrast to the previous chapters), but it fits well with the ascendancy of Assyria and the loss of Yehuda’s independence. Yeshayahu’s message here parallels Hoshea's prophecy from the same period (Chapters 5-6) as well as sections from *Mikha* (Chapters 6-7), the prophet from the plains of Yehuda.

**Civil war in Israel**

With the death of Yarovam II, the kingdom of Israel entered into a sharp decline, and *Sefer Melakhim* (II 15:8-26) describes a succession of violent struggles of succession: Yarovam’s son, Zekharia, reigned for only six months before Shalum ben Yavesh of Gil’ad assassinated and replaced him. No sooner had he assumed the throne than Menachem ben Gadi (from the Shomron, possibly from Tirtza) eliminated him to reign in his stead. Some twelve years later, Pekach ben Remalyahu, supported by “fifty men from the Gil’adim” (ibid. 25), killed Pekachya ben Menachem and seized the throne.

This period was like a long, drawn-out earthquake, which ultimately led to the destruction of Shomron and the exile of a large portion of the tribes of Israel. Clearly, internal social collapse preceded the physical destruction. The tribes of the Gil’ad, on the eastern side of the Jordan, undermined the central administration in Shomron, which was in the hands of the tribes of Yosef – Efraim and Menashe. This power struggle produced the palace coups which in turn led to the crumbling of the entire kingdom of Israel.

Further information about the civil wars that shattered the kingdom of Israel and also severely affected Yehuda can be deduced from Hoshea’s prophecy:

Hear this, O kohanim, and listen, O house of Israel, and house of the king – give ear: for it is unto you that judgment (of leadership) pertains, for you have been a snare on Mitzpa, and a net spread upon Tavor.

And the hunters have dug deep the slaughtering pits… Gil’ad is a city of them that work iniquity; it is covered with footprints of blood. And as troops of robbers wait for a man, so do the company of kohanim; they murder in the way towards Shekhem… (*Hoshea* 5:1-2; 6:8-9).

This is a shocking description of traps and ambushes from Mitzpeh-Gil’ad, where the schemes of blood-soaked insurrection originated, to Tavor: deep slaughtering pits are dug in a civil war, and troops wait to kill a “man” (king or military leader) on the road between Gil’ad and Shekhem, even as the *kohanim* (of the *bamot*) are engaged in licentiousness.

To this we may add the testimony of *Sefer Melakhim* concerning the horrifying cruelty of Menachem ben Gadi:

Then Menachem smote Tifsach, and all who were in it, and its borders [gates], because they did not open to him [in submission]. Therefore he smote it, and all the pregnant women therein he ripped up [with their fetuses]. (*Melakhim* II 15:16)

Many commentators have struggled with this verse. Most modern scholars maintain that the Tifsach referred to here is not the Aramean Thapsacus, on the bank of the Euphrates, near Aleppo[[19]](#footnote-19) (since even Yarovam ben Yoash, at the peak of his power, advanced only as far as “the way coming to Chamat”), but rather an important city within the kingdom of Shomron.[[20]](#footnote-20) According to this understanding, the verse describes a terrible campaign of killing inside Israel, with the aim of seizing power, in keeping with the slaughtering pits described by Hoshea.

Menachem came from Tirtza, or first conquered Tirtza. From there he came up to Shomron, seized the seat of the central Israelite administration, and then continued to the border of Efraim and Menashe (perhaps Tapuach), where he completed his campaign of slaughter by mutilating all the pregnant women. This description casts Menachem as one of the cruelest of the kings of Israel.[[21]](#footnote-21)

At the same time, another civil war broke out in the south, with the princes of Yehuda taking advantage of the chaos to attack the region of Efraim. A lesser-noticed description of this attack is found in the same chapter of *Hoshea*:

Sound the shofar in Giv’ah, and the trumpet in Rama; sound the alarm at Beit Aven: Behind you, Binyamin! Efraim shall be desolate in the day of rebuke; among the tribes of Israel I have made it known that which shall surely be. The princes of Yehuda are like those who remove a landmark; I will pour out My wrath on them like water. (*Hoshea* 5:8)

The attack on Efraim by the princes of Yehuda and the tribe of Binyamin began with the mobilization of troops on the hill of Binyamin (Giv’a), proceeded through the city of Rama (known today in Arabic as E(l)-Ram, to the north of Jerusalem), and attacked Efraim somewhere in the region of Beit-El (Beit Aven).

This attack, which is not mentioned in *Sefer Melakhim*, would seem to have occurred during the upheaval and weakness of the kingdom of Israel under Menachem ben Gadi. What was Shomron’s response? An appeal for help from the ascendant power, perhaps even opening the door to its domination:

Oppressed is Efraim, his judgment crushed, for he willingly followed a command [of kings]... And when Efraim saw his sickness, and Yehuda his cure, Efraim went to Assyria, and sent to a contentious king [Tiglat Pileser], but he is not able to cure you, nor shall he bring you healing. (*Hoshea* 5:11-13)

When the Assyrian soldiers appeared for the first time, they demanded an exorbitant fee, but it is not clear whether this preceded the attack by Yehuda or whether it came in the wake of Shomron’s desperate call for help:

There came against the land Pul, king of Assyria, and Menachem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that his hand might be with him to keep the kingdom in his hand. And Menachem exacted the money of Israel, of all the mighty men,[[22]](#footnote-22) to give the king of Assyria; of each man[[23]](#footnote-23) fifty shekels of silver. So the king of Assyria turned back and did not stay in the land. (*Melakhim* II 15:19-20)

Pul (Pulu) is the Babylonian name for Tiglat Pileser; it is an honorary name for the Assyrian king who also ruled over ancient Babylonia.[[24]](#footnote-24) The Assyrian record mentions the submission of Menachem:

I received tribute from […] Retzin of the land of Damesek, Menachem from the city Shomron.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The powerful, wealthy kingdom of Israel from the days of Yarovam was shattered, both internally and from without. This collapse is described with great precision in the prophecy of Hoshea (Chapters 5-6, which are actually a single unit). The early chapters of Hoshea make no mention of Assyria, nor is there any indication of the civil war between Gil’ad and Shekhem and from Beit-El to Tavor. On the other hand, in the prophecy where these elements feature diprominently (Chapters 5-6), no mention is made yet of Egypt, which entered the picture only in the days of Hoshea ben Ela, the last king (starting from Chapter 7). Thus, we can be certain that the prophecy of Chapters 5-6 dates in its entirety from the time of Menachem ben Gadi – neither earlier nor later.

If we look at *Yeshayahu* (Chapters 7-12, the days of Achaz), we find among other things a parallel description of the double civil war raging in the crumbling kingdom of Israel, with the extensive involvement of Yehuda at the second stage, when Pekach ben Remalyahu attacked the land of Binyamin and advanced all the way to Jerusalem:

Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts, the land is burned up, and the people also are as the fuel of fire; no man spares his brother. One snatches on the right hand, and is hungry; he eats on the left hand, and is not satisfied; they eat every man the flesh of his own arm. Menashe and Efraim; and Efraim and Menashe – they are together, against Yehuda… (*Yeshayahu* 9:18-20)

The first two verses here describe the inner struggles between “right” and “left” (south and north) in Israel. The third verse indicates that the war started between Efraim and Menashe, and that they ultimately united against a “common enemy” – Yehuda, as part of the coalition of Retzin, king of Aram-Damesek, with Pekach ben Remalyahu, in Shomron.

Another shocking image (apparently) from this period of civil war is recorded in the final chapter of *Mikha*, with no specific indication of time or place:

The righteous man has perished from the earth, and the upright among men is no more. They all lie in wait for blood; each man hunts his brother with a net... Do not trust a friend; do not put your confidence in a familiar friend; keep the doors of your mouth from she who lies in your embrace. For the son dishonors the father; the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man’s enemies are the members of his own household. (*Mikha* 7:2-6)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The following is a concise summary of *Yeshayahu – ke-Tzipporim Afot*, pp. 72-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ashurnasirpal II was the cruelest of the Assyrian kings; he burned captives alive. His military achievements were recorded on the walls of his magnificent palace in Kalhu (Nimrud). He upgraded his army of chariots, which for generations had already been regarded as a fearsome attack force, with a cavalry force. He also upgraded his siege equipment and methods for subduing fortified cities. See A. Melmet, “*Milchamot Yisrael ve-Ashur,*” in *Historia Tzeva’it bi-Yemei ha-Mikra* (Tel Aviv, 5725), pp. 244-245, and Y. Yadin, *Torat ha-Milchama be-Artzot ha-Mikra* (Jerusalem, 5723), pp. 322-331. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pharaoh Thutmose III managed to use the Aruna (Wadi Ara) route to conquer Megiddo: the ambushes that had been laid for him failed because he understood that the messengers who had come to him had tried to mislead him. The army of Pharaoh Ramesses II found itself attacked by Hittites in the Battle of Kadesh on the Orontes. See “*Ma’arachot Megiddo ve-Kadesh*” and “*Tachsisei ha-Milchama*” in *Historia Tzeva’it* (see n. 2 above), pp. 17-32. A strong eastern wind in the Red (Reed) sea crossing trapped the horses and horsemen of Pharaoh’s chariots, dooming them to destruction (*Shemot* 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Yeshayahu* 5:26. His words contain a sort of “prophetic midrash” on the curse in *Sefer Devarim* (28:49), “The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth…” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Historia Tzeva’it*, pp. 246-250; *Torat ha-Milchama* (above, n. 2), pp. 336-345. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Achav the Israelite” brought to the battle of Karkar 2,000 war chariots – more than the number contributed by Damesek and Chamat jointly. It seems that Yehuda, Moav, and Edom were also part of the Israelite force, under Achav’s leadership. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See M. Kogan, *Asufat Ketovot Historiot me-Ashur u-Bavel* (Jerusalem, 5764), pp. 9-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As described in the battle of Ramot Gil’ad (*Melakhim* II 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Torat ha-Milchama*, p. 337. On one hand, it is difficult to imagine a messenger of the king of Israel prostrating himself before the Assyrian king. On the other hand, it is strange to encounter (in Accadean) the name of the revolutionary who annihilated the dynasty of Omri and Achav, as “Yehu, son of Omri” – seemingly, because the Assyrians referred to Shomron by the name of its founder: “the land of the house of Omri.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Historia Tzeva’it*, p. 251; *Asufat Ketovot* (above, n. 7), pp. 27-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. With the exception of the campaign of Adadnirari III (810-783 B.C.E.), in the fifth year of his reign, directed mainly against Aram Damesek. This campaign would seem to be what brought salvation to Shomron in the days of Yehoachaz ben Yehu (*Melakhim* II 7:6-7; 13:5). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The ascent of Tiglat-Pileser III (810-783 B.C.E.) would seem to have occurred shortly after the collapse of the house of Yehu in Shomron, with the murder of Zekharia ben Yarovam (*Melakhim* II 15:8-10), and the eruption of civil war between Gil’ad and Shomron (ibid. 13-16), which rendered the kingdom of Israel helpless in the face of the external military threat. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Asufat Ketovot*, pp. 33-56; *Historia Tzeva’it*, pp. 252-255; *Torat ha-Milchama*, pp. 346-356. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Asufat Ketovot*, pp. 34-37 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 150 years ago, attempts were made to connect two broken tablets into a single unit. One features the name "Azriya’u," while the other shows the Assyrian word for "Yehuda," However, the joining of the two tablets has been completely rejected by scholars and it has been proven that the second inscription connects to a different tablet, from the time of Chizkiyahu. See N. Neeman, "*Masa'ot Malkhei Ashbur li-Yehuda le-Or Te'uda Ashurit Chadasha*," *Shenaton la-Mikra u-le-Cheker ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum* 2 (5737), pp. 164-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Melakhim* II mentions the name "Azaryahu" or "Azarya" 8 times (14:31; 15:1, 6-8, 17, 23, 27), and the name "Uziyahu" or "Uziya" 4 times (15:13, 30, 32, 34). In contrast, at the beginning of the Books of the Prophets (*Yeshayahu* 1:1; 7:1; *Hoshea*, *Amos*), in the prophecy of Zekharia (14:5), and in *Divrei ha-Yamim* II (Chapter 26), we find only the name "Uziya" or "Uziyahu." In *Divrei ha-Yamim* II (26:17, 20), the Kohen Gadol is called "Azaryahu the Head Kohen," while the king is referred to simply as "Uziyahu." This suggests that the name "Azaryahu/Azarya" was used earlier, but "Uziyahu/Uziya" became the dominant form of reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Yeshayahu* 10:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Asufat Ketovot*, pp. 41-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As suggested by M. Haran, “*Aliyatah ve-Yeridatah shel Mamlekhet Yarovam ben Yoash*, *Tzion* 31 (5726), pp. 29-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Encyclopedia Mikra’it*, Jerusalem 5738, s.v. “*Menachem,*” p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. We are familiar with foreign conquerors who committed such atrocities against Israel, including the Amonites and Arameans (*Melakhim* II 8:12; *Amos* 1:13), and perhaps the Assyrians as well (*Hoshea* 14:1). It appears that Menachem was influenced by the violence of the nations surrounding the kingdom of Israel - Amon to the east, Assyria and Aram to the north – especially during the bloody civil war against the Gil’adites. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. According to the accepted weight calculations, a thousand talents of silver would work out to around three million silver shekels (a talent equals 3,000 shekels – *Shemot* 28:25-28). If this sum was collected by means of a levy of 50 shekels per “mighty man,” there would have been about 60,000 individuals who paid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Prof. Yigael Yadin maintains that the collection of clay shards known as the Samaria ostraca date to the time of Menachem and attest to the king’s efforts to raise the heavy fee demanded by Assyria. The shards were found in the cellar of the royal palace in Shomron and include names of places, family names from the tribes of Menashe, including some of the daughters of Tzelofchad, and lists of the amounts of wine and oil received in various years. The family names seem to have also been the names of family estates in the portion of Menashe, based on *Yehoshua* 17:2-6. For a full description of the Samaria ostraca, see S. Ahituv, *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Mikhtav*, Jerusalem 5765, pp. 246-300. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Encyclopedia Mikra’it*, ibid., p. 32. *Divrei ha-Yamim* seems to suggest that these were two different kings: “And the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul, king of Assyria, and the spirit of Tilgat-Pileser, king of Assyria, and he carried them away – the Reuvenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Menashe…” (*Divrei ha-Yamim* I 5:26), but the verbs are in the singular. My father and teacher, of blessed memory, cited many examples in Tanakh where the *vav* conjunctive is used in the sense of an explanation, making the two items identical. Accordingly, *Divrei Ha-Yamim* is talking about one and the same king: Pul is Tilgat-Pileser. (Yechiel Bin-Nun, *Eretz ha-Moriah: Pirkei Mikra ve-Lashon*, Alon Shvut 5766, pp. 196-206). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. H. Tadmor, “*Ha-Analim shel Tiglat-Pileser ha-Shelishi Melekh Ashur*” (lines 150-157), *Divrei ha-Akademia ha-Leumit ha-Yisraelit le-Mada’im*, Jerusalem 5727; M. Kogan, *Asufat Ketovot*, pp. 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)