YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #18: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the Time of Chizkiyahu (7)**

**Sargon's conquests and construction of a new capital – Dur-Sharrukin**

Sargon II, who conquered Shomron, destroyed it, and deported its inhabitants, ruled over Assyria for 17 years (722-705 B.C.E.). His origins are unclear, as is his path to the throne, and his lineage as the son of Shalmanesser is certainly open to question. Some scholars suggest that he was a younger son of Tiglat-Pileser, but this hypothesis also lacks solid support. The opacity concerning his identity is in fact reflected in his Akkadian name: *Sharu-u-kinu* means "The ruler he is" – i.e., he is the lawful king. Such an assertion of legitimacy is appropriate to a ruler whose path to power is shrouded in obscurity.

Sargon’s first achievement was delivering the final blow of destruction and exile to Shomron. His reign was characterized by wars and campaigns of conquest throughout the kingdom. Wherever there arose the slightest hint of rebellion, Sargon's army would be dispatched to restore "calm" – as, for example, in the case of Ashdod (*Yeshayahu* 20).

Sargon is considered one of the cruelest kings of Assyria. In the fifth year of his reign (717 B.C.E.), he conquered Karkemish (located alongside the Euphrates on the northern border of today's Syria) and executed its last king, Pisiri. Karkemish, which had always been considered a strategic stronghold controlling important trade routes and had thus experienced many power struggles, became an Assyrian vassal. Sargon now dominated the region connecting the nations of the north and the east with Anatolia and the west (today's Turkey). Following the conquest of Karkemish, Sargon started building a new capital, which he named after himself: Dur-Shurrakin ("Sargon's Court"). It featured a magnificent royal palace, temples, and a ziggurat[[1]](#footnote-1) that had eight levels and stood 43 meters high. The city was surrounded by a 20-meter-high wall that was seven kilometers long. Sargon's inscriptions note that the width of the wall permitted seven chariots to pass through side by side. Square towers 24 meters high were built upon the wall, spaced 27 meters apart. The capital was inaugurated at a ceremony held in the month of Tishrei in the year 707 B.C.E. Statues were installed in the temples – including some representing eminently Babylonian gods, to which Sargon was drawn. He is considered the most pro-Babylonian of all the Assyrian rulers. Sargon was killed during one of his military campaigns; as will be discussed further below, his body was not found, so he could not be given a royal funeral.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**"O Assyria, the rod of My anger" (*Yeshayahu* 10:5) – the prophet's reaction to Sargon's arrogance**

For years, Yeshayahu had prophesied and foretold the ascendance of Assyria. He described its tremendous army of chariots, and the exile of the tribes that had fought against each other (9:7–10:4). Against the background of Sargon's arrogant view of himself as "king of the world," however, Yeshayahu utters an ominous prophecy regarding Assyria's role in history and its fall on a future "day of judgment."

Yeshayahu introduces this prophecy with a declaration reflecting the monotheistic prophetic view of history and the true role of the dominant, conquering nations, who attribute their power and victory to their gods. He declares that all that Assyria achieves in the world is done only in accordance with God's will and as His agent. Assyria is –

the rod of My anger, in whose hand as a staff is My indignation.

I send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. (*Yeshayahu* 10:5-6)

Assyria is meant to bring destruction upon those nations whose wickedness can no longer be permitted to continue and who must now face their "day of judgment." To all appearances, Assyria excels at this task. How can the God of Israel have placed the fate of His people in the hands of so ruthless and barbarous an empire as Assyria under Tiglat-Pileser and Sargon? Yeshayahu's answer emphasizes that the Assyrian Empire does not rule the world; rather, the Master of the universe runs the world using Assyria as His agent to punish wicked kingdoms – and especially the kingdom of Israel.[[3]](#footnote-3) Sargon, however, does not see himself as an agent. He regards himself as superior to all the kings who preceded him:

But he does not imagine it so, nor does his heart think so; for it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few.

For he says, Are not my princes all of them kings?

Is not Kalno like Karkemish? Is not Chamat like Arpad? Is not Shomron like Damascus?

As my hand has reached the kingdoms of the idols, whose graven images exceeded those of Jerusalem and of Shomron,

Shall I not do as I have done to Shomron and her idols, to Jerusalem and her idols? (Ibid. 7-11)

Here we have a picture of the Assyrian conquests up to the time of Sargon: Karkemish and Shomron, like Arpad, Chamat, and Damascus before them, have all become Assyrian vassals, and the Assyrian gods preside over all. Sargon imagines himself the supreme ruler of all these kingdoms; he tramples them all beneath his feet. He refers derisively to the "kingdoms of the idols" and promises that the fate of Jerusalem will be like that of Shomron.

Here the prophet launches into his description of the "day of judgment" for Assyria:

Should the axe boast in relation to him that hews with it? Should the saw magnify itself against him that moves it? As if a rod should move them that lift it up, or as if a staff should lift up him that is not wood.

Therefore the Lord, the Lord of hosts, will send leanness among his fat ones, and in place of his glory there shall be kindled a burning like the burning of fire.

And the light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame, and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day.

And the glory of his forest and of his fruitful field He will consume, both soul and body, and it shall be as when a sick man wastes away.

And the remnant of the trees of his forest shall be few, that a child may write them down.

And it shall come to pass on that day that the remnant of Israel, and they that are escaped of the house of Yaakov, shall no more rely upon him that smote them, but shall rely upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth.

A remnant shall return, the remnant of Yaakov, unto God, the Mighty One. (Ibid. 15-21)

Here, too, Yeshayahu articulates some fundamental elements of the principle of Divine retribution in history. If the Assyrian conqueror is truly no more than an instrument in God’s hand, an instrument clearly has no will of its own and there is no point in judging or punishing it. But from the point of view of prophecy, a human being is created in the image of God and has a span of free choice; specifically, he has consciousness and intent. The king of Assyria has no intention of being the rod of God’s anger, and he will be punished for his egocentric consciousness, along with his deviation from the mission entrusted to him.

Even though, according to the prophetic view, God sent Assyria to destroy the kingdom of Israel and to cause damage to the kingdom of Yehuda, which has forgotten God and has forged a covenant with Assyria, He will bring salvation to Yehuda and will watch over the remnant. This is Yeshayahu’s consistent message: even if cataclysmic catastrophe befalls the kingdom of Yehuda and Israel, there will always remain a faithful remnant that will regenerate. Yeshayahu’s message elaborates on the verse in the Torah: “I will not reject them, nor will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly… for I am the Lord their God.” (Vayikra 26:44)

At this point, Yeshayahu asks the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who are fearful in the face of the Assyrian conquests, to show fortitude along with their king, Chizkiyahu, and to believe in the God of Israel:

Therefore, so says the Lord God of hosts: Do not fear, My people that dwells in Tzion; do not be afraid of Assyria, though he smites you with the rod and lifts up his staff against you in the manner of Egypt.

For yet a very little while and the indignation will be accomplished, and My anger shall be to their destruction.

And the Lord of hosts will stir up against him a scourge, as in the slaughter of Midian at the Rock of Orev, and as His rod was over the sea, so He shall lift it up in the manner of Egypt.

And it shall come to pass on that day that his burden shall depart from off your shoulder, and his yoke from off your neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed by reason of fatness. (*Yeshayahu* 10:24-27)

Yeshayahu recalls the sweet memory of Gidon’s victory over Midian at the rock of Orev, which he invokes in the same way that we recall “the miracles that you performed for our forefathers in those days.” The special experience of the victory of the few against the many, in a situation that appeared hopeless, taught a dual lesson regarding how God runs the world and watches over His people. Yeshayahu concludes his prophecy with the words: “the yoke shall be destroyed by reason of fatness” – the soft, fatty meat will succeed in breaking the yoke of Assyria and liberating Yehuda.

There is a Talmudic teaching in which R. Yitzchak Nafcha, a 3rd-century Sage of *Eretz Yisrael*, seeks to connect this verse with the revolutionary return to Torah in the time of Chizkiyahu:

[This means that] the yoke of Sancheriv [a generic reference to all Assyrian kings] will be destroyed on account of the oil [fatness] of Chizkiyahu, which burned in the synagogues and *batei midrash*. What did he do? He planted a sword by the door of the *beit midrash* and proclaimed, “Whoever does not study Torah will be pierced with the sword.” A search was made from Dan to Beer-Sheva and no ignoramus was found, from Gevat to Antipras, and no boy or girl, man or woman was found who was not thoroughly proficient in the laws of *tum’a* and *tahara* [a code phrase for complete separation from idolatry].” (Bavli, *Sanhedrin* 94b)

**The conquest of Babylonia and the death of Sargon (710-705 B.C.E.)**

The coalition brought together by Merodakh-Baladan fell to pieces (710 B.C.E.). Sargon conquered Babylonia and from that point began to call himself “king of Assyria, ruler of Babylonia.” This was an ancient title that had been held by the early Assyrian kings who asserted their reign over Babylonia owing to its importance.[[4]](#footnote-4) Sargon viewed himself as an Assyrian king who was pro-Babylonian (as noted, he even worshipped Babylonian gods – unlike his son, Sancheriv, who would later destroy temples and palaces in Babylonia in 703 B.C.E.).

This background helps us to understand a record from the beginning of Sancheriv’s reign, stating that Sancheriv approached diviners and sorcerers, seeking to hear the circumstances of his father Sargon’s death on the battlefield somewhere in the north: “They would explain to me about the death of Sargon and why he was not buried in his house [i.e., his appointed grave].”[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is clear from this record that Sargon did not die a natural death and was not buried in his “house.” It would seem that his corpse was violated, or burned; in any event, it disappeared.[[6]](#footnote-6) Sancheriv conducted an inquiry into the circumstances of his father’s death. After consulting with the magicians, he arrived at the conclusion that his father’s sin had been related to dishonoring the Assyrian gods. Some suggested that Sargon had sinned by moving his capital elsewhere.[[7]](#footnote-7) Upon Sargon’s death, Sancheriv moved the capital from Dur-Sharrukin to the great Nineveh, as an act of repair and repentance for his father’s presumptuousness. For the same reason, he dishonored the Babylonian gods and championed the gods of Assyria.

**Chapter 14: Yeshayahu’s prophecy upon the death of Sargon**

Chapters 13-23 of *Sefer Yeshayahu* are all devoted to prophecies about the nations, and they are all introduced with the word *masa* – “the burden.” Chapters 13-14 speak of the burden of Babylonia; the end of Chapter 14 speaks of the burden of Philistia; Chapters 15-16 contain the burden of Moav; Chapter 17 – Damascus; Chapter 19 – Egypt; Chapter 21 – the burdensof the wilderness of the sea, of Duma, and of Arabia; Chapter 22 – the valley of vision (the only “burden” that is directed towards Jerusalem); and Chapter 23 – Tyre.

Where, among all of these, is the burden of Assyria? How is it possible that a collection of “burden” prophecies, addressing all the nations, ignores the greatest empire of the time?

Furthermore, at the time the “burden of Babylonia” in Chapters 13-14 was uttered, Babylonia was a minor city-state next to the Persian Gulf that threatened no one, yet Yeshayahu describes a mighty empire, as Babylonia would become a century later, and its defeat by the Persians eighty years after that. What was the practical meaning of this prophecy for Yeshayahu’s time?

Yechezkel Kaufman notes that the depiction of the king in the “burden of Babylonia” does not match the actual character of the kings of Babylonia at the time. The Babylonian kings were considered cultured people who occupied themselves with splendid buildings, temples, and religion. In contrast, the description of the king in the “burden of Babylonia” matches more closely the character of the kings of Assyria, thus leading Kaufman to hypothesize that the “burden of Babylonia” is in fact the “burden of Assyria”:

[The Assyrian kings] were all crueler than wild animals. Each one of them “smote nations in wrath” (*Yeshayahu* 14:6). They never tired of boasting of their implementation of bizarre forms of death, mutilation of bodies, destruction of cities, devastation of fields, torture of captives, and so on. In Yeshayahu’s generation (starting from the time of Tiglat-Pileser), nations were uprooted and deported from one land to another – a fixed policy of the Assyrian administration. The displacement of masses of men, women, and children over such distances by these bloodthirsty thugs unquestionably entailed mass killings. All of this is clearly reflected in Chapter 14… The content of the burden of “Babylonia” and its king therefore shows quite clearly that the prophecy is speaking not of Babylonia, but of Assyria.… [The fact that the prophet] refers to Assyria as Babylonia should not surprise us. Babylonia was the ancient, glorious kingdom, and the kings of Assyria, along with the early kings of Persia, prided themselves on the title “king of Babylonia.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Kaufman’s claim that “Babylonia” here actually refers to Assyria seems even more likely at the end of the prophecy, where the prophet comes back to God’s oft-repeated message:

That I will break Assyria in My land, and upon My mountains tread him underfoot; then shall his yoke depart from off them, and his burden depart from off their shoulder. (*Yeshayahu* 14:25)

In other words, the prophecy opens with Babylonia, but ends up speaking of Assyria; this indicates that “Babylonia” and “Assyria” here are one and the same.

We can read this special chapter of the “burden of Babylonia” as referring to Sargon at his death. At the end of the “burden,” Yeshayahu taunts the Assyrian king who fell from the heaven to the earth – to the glee of the cedars of Lebanon, which would no longer be felled to build his palaces – and descended to Sheol, to be greeted by all the kings whom he himself had sent there:

The whole earth is at rest and is quiet; they break forth into singing.

Also the cypresses rejoice at you, and the cedars of Lebanon: “Since you lay down, no feller comes up against us.”

Sheol from beneath moves for you, to meet you at your arrival; the shades are stirred up for you; all the chiefs of the earth are raised up from their thrones, all the kings of the nations.

They all answer and say to you: “Have you then become weak as we are? Have you become like us?

Your pride has been brought down to Sheol, and the sweet sound of your psalteries; the maggot is spread under you, and the worms cover you.

How you are fallen from heaven, O day-star, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who presided over nations.

And you said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit upon the mount of meeting in the uttermost parts of the north.

I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.

But you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the uttermost parts of the pit.

Those who saw you look closely upon you, they observe you earnestly: Is this the man who caused the earth to tremble, who caused kingdoms to shake,

Who made the world like a wilderness and destroyed its cities, who did not open the house of his prisoners?”

All the kings of the nations, all of them, sleep in glory – each in his own house.

But you are cast away from your grave, like a despised offshoot, in the raiment of the slain that are thrust through with the sword, that go down to the stones of the pit, like a carcass trodden underfoot.

You shall not be joined with them in burial because you have destroyed your land and slain your people. The seed of evil-doers shall not be named forever. (Ibid. 7-20)

Once we know a little about Sargon, it is difficult not to view Yeshayahu’s “burden of Babylon” as referring to the only king of Assyria who worshipped Babylonian gods and who was not brought to burial: “You are cast away from your grave like a despised offshoot… like a carcass trodden underfoot; you shall not be joined with them in burial….”

With this perspective in mind, let us consider the Rambam’s interpretation of the “burden of Babylonia,” which becomes a conceptual model in his philosophy. The Rambam argues that prophetic language makes frequent use of metaphor, but every description of cosmic catastrophe is actually meant in relation to some historic event and involves no change of the laws of nature (in keeping with his well-known approach concerning the time of Mashiach, at the end of his Laws of Kings). He explains our chapter as follows:

Having received the Divine mission to prophesy the destruction of the Babylonian empire, **the death of Sancheriv, and that of Nebuchadnetzar, who succeeded him**, Yeshayahu commences in the following manner to describe their fall and the end of their dominion, their defeat, and such evils as are endured by all who are vanquished and compelled to flee before the enemy’s victorious sword: “For the stars of heaven, and the constellations thereof, shall not give their light: the sun is darkened in its going forth, and the moon shall not cause its light to shine" (13:10)….

He speaks in a similar manner when he describes the poverty and humiliation of the people of Israel, their captivity and their defeat, the continuous misfortunes caused by the wicked Sancheriv when he ruled over all the fortified places of Yehuda…. He says, “…for the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake” (24:17-20)…. At the end of the same prophecy, when Yeshayahu describes how God will punish Sancheriv, destroy his mighty empire, and reduce him to disgrace, he uses the following image (24:23): “Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the Lord of hosts shall reign,” etc.… The prophet then depicts the peace of the children of Israel after the death of Sancheriv… using an image of the light of the sun and the moon greatly increasing (30:26).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Thus, the Rambam understands the “burden of Babylon” as referring, first and foremost, to Assyria, except that he sees it as also including the Chaldea-Babylonia power (Nevukhadretzar) that rose up after Assyria and laid waste to Jerusalem. The Rambam argues that Yeshayahu’s prophecy, which on the superficial level appears to be directed to the Assyrian regime of his time, will reappear in cyclical fashion throughout history:

But you must know that any day of great salvation or of great distress is called "the great and terrible day of the Lord." (Ibid.)

In the meta-historical dimension, the prophecy is no longer talking about a specific date, or a particular event or person; rather, it describes a model that will recur again and again in history: “the great and terrible day of the Lord.” This is a day of reorganization of the world, opening it up once again to man’s moral free choice. It includes upheaval and an overturning of the political systems of empires – and at such moments, a window of opportunity opens for Israel’s salvation.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. A pyramidal temple-tower meant to symbolize a connection between heaven and earth, somewhat like the Tower of Bavel described in the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Much of the information here is taken from Ch. Tadmor, *Chet'o shel Sargon*," *Eretz Yisrael* 5 (5719), pp. 153-163; the article elaborates in much greater detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. B. Oppenheimer, “Yichud Tefisato ha-Historit shel Yeshayahu”, *Chug Beit ha-Nasi* 1, pp. 8-9.] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This theory is proposed by Y. Kaufman, *Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit* III, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From document K4730, published by Winkler; see Tadmor, cited in *shiur* no. 16, n. 1, pp. 154-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sargon is the only one among the kings of Assyria in Yeshayahu’s time who was not killed in his palace, but rather at war – seemingly, in the course of a failed military campaign. See B. Oppenheimer, “*Ha-Nevu’a al Helel ben Shachar*,” *Beit Mikra* 41 (5756), pp. 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ch. Tadmor, “*Chizkiyahu ve-Sancheriv*” in B. Tzvieli (ed.), *Sichot ba-Mikra*, 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kaufman, *Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit* III, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Moreh Nevukhim* part II, chapter 29. The translation here is that of Sefaria, with very minor changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)