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 #31: The Reign of Yoshiyahu (3a)**

What was happening in the world at the time of the great *teshuva* of Yoshiyahu and the prophecies of the young Yirmiyahu?

The Assyrian empire was losing power, and Nachum’s vision foretold the total destruction of its capital:

The gates of the river are opened, and the palace is dissolved…

And Nineveh has been from old like a pool of water, yet they flee away… (*Nachum* 2:7-9)

***Nachum* Chapter 3: Nineveh is the “city of blood”**

About 50 years after the Assyrian army reached southern Egypt (661 B.C.E.) and conquered the capital, which Nachum describes as “No-Amon that dwelled upon the rivers” (3:8), the army of the Medes (in a coalition with Nevukhadnetzar of Babylonia) laid siege to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which lay on the eastern bank of the Tigris. It would seem that they flooded it by stopping up the canals, and the tributary of the Tigris that passed through the city, turning it into a pool; they then razed the city to the ground (612 B.C.E.). Most inhabitants of Nineveh were exiled to Charan, and the city was never rebuilt; the population scattered with no vision of return, and the ruins waited to be explored by archaeologists.

The prophet compares Nineveh to No-Amon in Egypt: Just as the waters of the Nile had not protected No-Amon from the army of Nineveh, so the waters of the Tigris would flood Nineveh and not protect it when it fell into the hands of the Medes – and no one would be sorry:

Nineveh is laid waste; who will bemoan her? Whence shall I seek comforters for you?

Are you better than No-Amon, that dwelled among the rivers, that had the waters round about her, whose rampart was the sea, and of the sea her wall?

Kush was your strength, and Egypt, and it was infinite; Put and Lubim were your helpers.

Yet she was carried away, she [No-Amon, and likewise, Nineveh] went into captivity; her young children also were dashed in pieces at the head of all the streets… (3:7-10)

When the sun arises [the king] flees away, and his place is not known, where are [the leaders]?

Your shepherds [military leaders] slumber, O king of Assyria; your mighty ones are at rest; your people are scattered upon the mountains and there is none to gather them…

For upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually? (Ibid. 17-19)

Once Nachum’s vision was fulfilled in all its detail, however, a problem arose. Many people were convinced that this was God’s eternal word, “the footsteps of a herald” (ibid. 2:1); “Trouble shall not rise up a second time” (1:9); “I shall afflict you no more” (1:12). Anyone who had doubts was probably told, “‘The burden of Nineveh… the vision of Nachum’” (1:1) – have you not heard of the prophecy fulfilled in the 18th year of the reign of Yoshiyahu, and ten years later, with the destruction of Nineveh?

The enthusiastic proponents of Nachum’s “burden” prophecy were unwilling to listen to the prophecies of Tzefanya, Chulda, Chavakuk, and Yirmiyahu.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Chavakuk – a prophetic cry of anguish**

The destruction of Nineveh actually had two aspects, as represented by the respective prophecies of Nachum and Chavakuk: on one hand, great relief at the repayment of Assyria’s cruelty; on the other hand, the grim threat of new enemies (similar to the situation in Eastern Europe in 1945).

The dread Chavakuk expressed (Chapter 1) in the face of the ascent of the Chaldeans is unusual, and represents a watershed in prophecy (especially in relation to other "burden" prophecies): unlike any other prophet known to us, *Sefer Chavakuk* opens with the prophet’s own distress:

The burden which Chavakuk the prophet saw:

How long, O Lord, shall I cry, and You will not hear? I cry out to You of violence, and You will not save.

Why do You show me iniquity…

Therefore, justice goes forth deformed. (*Chavakuk* 1:1-4)

Only after this sharing of his own desperation does Chavakuk convey his prophecy:

Look among the nations and behold, and wonder marvelously, for behold, a work shall be wrought in your days which you will not believe though it be told to you.

For behold, I raise up the Chaldeans [= rulers of Babylonia], that harsh and unhesitating nation, that march through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling-places that are not theirs.

They are terrible and dreadful…

Their horses are swifter than leopards… Their horsemen come from afar; they fly as a vulture that makes haste to devour.

They come all of them for violence…

They scoff at kings… They deride every stronghold, for they heap up earth, and take it. (1:5-10)

Upright, righteous people, who believed in God's deliverance and His justice, had dreamed and hoped that the fall of the Assyrian empire would usher in a better reality with less violence, but the "burden" vision that God reveals to Chavakuk reveals the depth of the crisis: the Assyrians will be replaced by Chaldean-Babylonians. Instead of nations and kingdoms being gathered up "as one gathers eggs that are forsaken" (*Yeshayahu* 10:14), the Chaldeans will gather up "men as the fish of the sea" (*Chavakuk* 1:14) in giant nets, offering no chance of escape:

Shall they therefore empty their net [and refill it], and not spare, [being permitted] to slay the nations continually? (1:17)

A personal story: Within the framework of my Nachal unit, I worked in fish pools, and this metaphor is especially powerful for me. When one spreads the net, the fish do not sense the danger. Once the net is pulled closed, a great tumult erupts inside. There are always holes in the net, and there are always the few that are able to get away, swimming away under the net or even jumping up out of it, while the majority remain trapped.

*Dear God, human beings caught like fish in a net?!*

***Chavakuk* Chapter 2 – When will Divine justice be revealed with regard to the great powers?**

Yeshayahu’s prophecy – "O Assyria, the rod of My anger…" (10:5) – was familiar to Chavakuk:

Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die; [we shall know that] You, O Lord, have placed them [as a ruling empire] for judgment [of the world], and You, O Rock, have established them to bring rebuke...(1:12)

[So] why do You look when they deal treacherously, and hold Your peace, when the wicked one swallows up the one who is more righteous than he? (1:13)

How long, O Lord…

Therefore the law is slacked… for the wicked besets the righteous; therefore justice goes forth deformed! (1:1-4)

The prophetic drama reaches a climax, and conventional answers will no longer suffice, after Assyria falls and is replaced by the Chaldeans:

I will stand upon my watch, and set myself upon the tower, to look out and see what He will speak by me and what answer to my reproof. (2:1)

The prophet’s cry is met with an answer that has become a tenet of Jewish faith:

And the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision, and engrave it upon tablets, that a man may read it swiftly.

*For* *the vision is yet for the appointed time*, and it declares of the end, and does not lie.*[Even] if it tarries, wait for it*, because it will surely come; it will not delay… *But* *the righteous man shall live by his faith*. (2:2-4)

There is order in history, just as in nature, reflecting the will of the Creator. In the power struggles over the course of history, Chaldeans may arise in place of Assyrians; Romans in place of Hellenists; German Nazis in place of the German Empire; a Soviet dictatorship in place of Czarist Russia – and yet upright people of faith will live through all these changes with full confidence that the wicked will eventually receive what they deserve, through the laws of history (2:8), and that there is a hidden future date for the revelation of perfect justice in the world.

Adopting the language of Yeshayahu (11:9), Chavakuk declares, “For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (2:14).

In the meantime, however, the people will need to be prepared for great suffering.

**Yirmiyahu – an unprecedented appointment from the womb (for later)**

While the description of the birth and rescue of Moshe may be understood as God’s appointing him for his mission from before he was born, this is not stated explicitly. Only one prophet is explicitly described as having been designated and consecrated for his prophetic role from before birth – Yirmiyahu of Anatot:

Before I formed you in the belly I knew you, and before you came forth from the womb I sanctified you; I have appointed you a prophet unto the nations. (*Yirmiyahu* 1:5)

Why is this so?

Yirmiyahu is charged with prophesying at a historical crossroads more critical and fateful than that facing Yeshayahu and the prophets of his generation: in their time, Jerusalem survived; during Yirmiyahu’s time, the ascent of Chaldean Babylonia, replacing Assyria, would leave Jerusalem in ruins and desolation. Assyria left nothing behind where it had conquered, but imported a new population and tended to the conquered lands (such as, for example, Shomron). The Babylonians, in contrast, left scorched earth:

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to root out and pull down, and to destroy and to overthrow; to build and to plant. (1:10)

Faced with the cataclysmic threat of Babylonia, Yirmiyahu would remain completely alone. Jerusalem is incapable of understanding the impending danger and refuses to “put its head down” until the crisis is over. Hence, the prophecies of Yirmiyahu themselves, with their menacing descriptions of the evil that would come from the north, are considered a dangerous threat, and he is persecuted:

And they [the kings and princes of Yehuda, the *kohanim* and the people] shall fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you. (1:19)

Yirmiyahu himself will be saved, but the land will not:

Then the Lord said to me, “Out of the north shall the evil break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land.” (1:14)

All of this will happen only in the second half of Yirmiyahu’s prophecy, when God’s word comes to him during the reigns of Yehoyakim and Tzidkiyahu (1:3). But while Yirmiyahu is still a young boy in the time of Yoshiyahu (13th to 31st year of his reign), a completely different reality prevails. Why, then, is the prophecy of the appointment located in the last two periods of the prophet’s life, holding the blackest and direst future, which only the prophet himself will survive?

Apparently, this anticipated future is the reason for the unusual appointment of the prophet from even before his birth.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This explains why Yirmiyahu (23:33-39) regarded prophecies of “the burden of God” as false prophecies! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)