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 #21: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the Time of Chizkiyahu (10)**

**Sancheriv’s campaign (701 B.C.E.)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Sancheriv began his campaign by conquering the Phoenician cities that controlled the coastline. Moving southward, he made a few stops to restore order: first Acre, then he conquered Jaffa, Beit Dagon, Bnei Brak, and Azor, which were under the patronage of Tzidka (Sidqa), king of Ashkelon – an important figure in the rebellion against Assyria. From there, Sancheriv moved on to Ashdod – and was confronted for the first time by Egyptian troops, who were waiting for him. The first battle took place near Yavneh, as Sancheriv describes:

And the allies called to the kings of Egypt and the bowmen of the king of Kush, and his chariots and horsemen – a countless host – and they came to their aid. In the field of Eltekeh they waged a battle against me […] I fought them and defeated them. During the battle I caught alive the Egyptian charioteers and princes, together with the charioteers of the king of Kush.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Following this victory, Sancheriv continued to the cities of Philistia that were ruled by Yehuda. He conquered Ekron (which had handed over its king, Padi, to Chizkiyahu as a “gift of friendship”) and hanged the princes of Ekron who had rebelled against him on stakes around the city. From there he went on to the western regions of Yehuda – the lowlands.

The first fortress that he encountered in Yehuda was the city of Azeka, which sits on a hilltop and controls the entrance to the Valley of Elah, on the road to Beit Lechem and Jerusalem. In another Assyrian inscription, Sancheriv describes Azeka as a city whose walls “rise up to heaven” like “an eagle’s nest,” and recounts how his army managed to climb the range of hills and storm the wall with siege ramps and battering rams, eventually capturing it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The result of the destruction of the cities in the lowlands of Yehuda is not described at any length in *Sefer Melakhim*, but is addressed in the prophecy of Mikha of Morasha – the only prophet (known to us) who lived in this region. Only a prophet who lived there could have described the catastrophe as a flood of water and fire, like the eruption of a volcano, coming from the mountain region down to the lowlands. It is notable that Mikha does not describe the disaster as coming from the north, from whence the army of Assyria came, but from God, “from the Sanctuary of His holiness”:

Hear, all you peoples; hearken, earth and all that is therein, and let the Lord God be witness against you, the Lord from the Sanctuary of His holiness.

For behold, the Lord comes forth out of His place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth.

And the mountains shall be molten under Him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, as waters that are poured down a steep place.

Because of the transgression of Yaakov is all of this, and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Yaakov? Is it not Shomron? And what are the high places of Yehuda? Are they not Jerusalem?

Therefore I will make Shomron a heap in the field, a place for the planting of vineyards, and I will pour down its stones into the valley, and I will uncover its foundations. (*Mikha* 1:2-6)

The prophet then eulogizes the cities of Yehuda in Philistia – all of which are familiar to him, though only some are known to us:

For this I will wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked, I will make a wailing like the jackals and a mourning like the ostriches.

For her wound is incurable, for it has come as far as Yehuda; it reaches to the gate of My people, to Jerusalem.

Tell it not in Gat, weep not at all; at Beit le-Afra roll yourself in the dust.

Pass away, O inhabitant of Shafir, in nakedness and shame; the inhabitant of Tza’anan has not come forth, the wailing of Beit ha-Etzel shall take from you its standing-place.

For the inhabitant of Marot waits anxiously for good, because evil has come down from the Lord to the gate of Jerusalem.

Bind the chariots to the swift steeds, O inhabitant of Lachish; she was the beginning of sin for the daughter of Tzion, for the transgressions of Israel are found in you.

Therefore you shall give a parting gift to Moreshet-Gat; the houses of Achziv shall be a deceitful thing for the kings of Israel.

Still I will bring to you, O inhabitant of Maresha, him that shall inherit you; the glory of Israel shall come even to Adulam. (Ibid. 8-15)

Sancheriv’s next stop was Lachish, the most prominent city in the lowlands of Yehuda and second only to Jerusalem in importance.[[4]](#footnote-4) He laid siege to this strongly fortified city and conquered it shortly afterwards, turning it into his forward command post on the way to Chevron, the heart of the rebellious Yehuda. The Assyrian battalions continued southward up to the Be’er Sheva region. Sancheriv wanted to leave Jerusalem for “dessert.”

Many of the details about the siege, the bloody war, and the capture of Lachish are known to us from reliefs discovered at Nineveh. Lachish occupies a central place in their portrayals, as though it were the capital of Yehuda. It is painful to see the pictures of the tortured, humiliated captives depicted in Assyrian victory parades. Yeshayahu’s descriptions of prisoners being led naked and barefoot (Chapter 20, from the rebellion of Ashdod), are faithfully illustrated in these reliefs (this time, relating to Yehuda), along with pictures of the battle in which Yehuda’s fighters made use of the weapons and fortifications prepared by Uziyahu in the previous generation.

In the Assyrian inscriptions, Sancheriv summarizes this stage of his successful campaign:

As for the king of Yehuda, Chizkiyahu, who had not submitted to my yoke, I besieged and captured 46 of his fortified cities, along with smaller towns in their area without number, using battering rams and bringing up siege engines, and by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breaches. I brought away from them and counted as spoil 200,150: great and small, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, cattle, and sheep without number. [Chizkiyahu] himself, like a caged bird, I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city. I threw up earthworks against him – the one coming out of the city-gate I turned back to his misery.

It is difficult to know how many of the 200,000 of the spoil were people and how many were horses, mules, and camels, but it is clear that many thousands of inhabitants of the lowlands of Yehuda, and other cities, were led into captivity – like their brethren from Shomron.

Mikha, who witnessed all of this first-hand, weeps and mourns:

Make yourself bald, and cut off your hair [in mourning] over the children of your delight; enlarge your baldness like the vulture, for they have gone into captivity from you. (Ibid. 16)

Chizkiyahu saw no choice but to subjugate himself to the king of Assyria. Sancheriv’s inscriptions tell us that Chizkiyahu sent him a large tribute, including 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver (in the biblical account, the silver is “only” 300 talents), precious stones, ivory-inlaid furniture, boxwood, and more, along with some of his daughters, concubines, and servants. The terms of Chizkiyahu’s surrender included, of course, the freeing of Padi, king of Ekron, from his imprisonment and his return to the throne in Ekron.

*Sefer Melakhim* offers a concise description of his portion of the humiliating episode:

And in the fourteenth year of King Chizkiyahu, Sancheriv, king of Assyria, came up against all the fortified cities of Yehuda, and took them.

And Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, sent to the king of Assyria, to Lachish, saying: “I have offended; turn back from me; that which you put upon me I will bear.” And the king of Assyria appointed for Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold.

And Chizkiyahu gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king’s house.

At that time Chizkiyahu cut off the gold from the doors of the Temple of the Lord, and from the doorposts which Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria. (*Melakhim* II 18:13-16)

Along with Mikha’s descriptions of Yehuda’s destruction we have those of Yeshayahu, from his vantage point in Jerusalem (without a list of places):

On what [part] will you yet be stricken, seeing you stray away more and more? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

From the sole of the foot to the head there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises, and festering sores; they have not been pressed, nor bound up, nor mollified with oil.

Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire; your land – strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, and overthrown by floods.

And the daughter of Tzion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. (*Yeshayahu* 1:5-8)

For the Assyrians, this was the final triumphant note in the story of the war.

Sancheriv almost certainly had no interest in telling the story of Jerusalem, which he did not conquer. He preferred to highlight the conquest of Lachish, where he is depicted sitting upon his throne with a procession of captives passing before him. The Lachish relief was found in Nineveh, decorating a special victory palace that Sancheriv had built for this purpose. There is certainly room to suggest that this tremendous effort to display the conquest of Lachish and its captives was intended to blur what had happened in Jerusalem.

**Sancheriv’s campaign in Yeshayahu’s early prophecy (10:24-34)**

According to the biblical description, Sancheriv received the onerous tribute that Chizkiyahu sent, but it did not satisfy him. He decided to turn up the pressure on Jerusalem, with the hope of opening its gates to the Assyrian army and punishing the rebels in this disloyal capital city, as was the general policy throughout the period of the Assyrian Empire. To this end he sent his “turtanu,” as well as Ravshakeh (both very senior figures in the Assyrian army, and apparently with secondary forces as backup) to wage psychological war against Jerusalem. The main body of the Assyrian army had no time to amuse itself with the besieged Jerusalem; the real enemy was still awaiting them along the coast.

So long as Jerusalem was engaged in preparations for the revolt, Yeshayahu sat and wept over the sealing of hearts and minds. The prophet saw that the Assyrian army controlled the known world at the time (as the rod of God’s wrath!), and he knew that Chizkiyahu was leading the people into suicide and destruction.

But his oppositional conduct stopped as soon as the war broke out. When the news came that dozens of cities in Yehuda had fallen, and when Sancheriv’s army started approaching Jerusalem to lay siege to it, Yeshayahu took on the role of strengthening the spirit and resilience of the king and the people. (This is apparent in Chapter 37 as well.)

The prophecy uses realistic language to describe the moments leading up to the siege. In view of the fright that had seized the inhabitants of the city, Yeshayahu sought to lift their spirits and strengthen their faith in God’s salvation, which would surely come in the blink of an eye. This prophecy, describing the arrogance of the Assyrian Empire going back to the time of Tiglat-Pileser, is one of Yeshayahu’s earlier prophecies:

Therefore, says the Lord God of hosts: O 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 (or “on the way to”) Egypt.

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

And the Lord of hosts shall 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 shall He lift it up after the manner of Egypt.

And it shall come to pass in 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.

He has come to Ayat, he has passed through Migron; at Michmas he lays up his baggage,

They have gone over the pass; they have taken up their lodging at Geva; Rama trembles, Giv’at Shaul has fled.

Cry out with a shrill voice, O daughter of Galim! Listen, O Laish! O you poor Anatot!

Madmenah is in mad flight; the inhabitants of Gevim flee for cover.

This very day he shall halt at Nov, shaking his hand at the mount of the daughter of Tzion, the hill of Jerusalem.

Behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, shall lop the boughs with terror; and the high ones of stature shall be hewn down, and the lofty shall be laid low.

And He shall cut down the thickets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one. (*Yeshayahu* 10:24-34)

The introduction (“O My people… do not be afraid”) would be appropriate to any of the chapters that talk about Assyria’s ascent to Eretz Yisrael, but a closer reading shows that this was a specific campaign, “on the way to Egypt.” It is tempting to identify this as the campaign of Sancheriv that is so well documented in the Assyrian inscriptions. The main problem with this identification is the route and direction that are described. According to the inscription, Sancheriv came from the sea and the coastal region, entering Yehuda from the southwest (via Azeka and Lachish), and sending his emissaries from Lachish to Jerusalem (*Melakhim* II 18:17; *Yeshayahu* 36:2). However, Yeshayahu describes a campaign to Jerusalem that comes from the northeast and does not match Sancheriv’s record of his campaign to Yehuda. At the same time, it is clear that Yeshayahu is describing something real and not a vision. The detailed landmarks reflect a path that rises from the Jordan Valley straight into eastern Binyamin and joins up with the main mountain route near Rama (= El-Ram, opposite the Atarot airport; this is not the main road leading to Jerusalem from the north, from the Beit-El area).[[5]](#footnote-5) In view of this paradox, various scholars have sought indications that would connect the route described in the prophecy to the actual Assyrian campaign to Yehuda.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It stands to reason that Assyria dispatched forces from other areas as well, in order to deal with the rebellious capital, while the main body of the army was sent to the frontlines in the Philistia region to deal with the real enemy – Egypt, whose army had started to move its forces toward Gaza. In these circumstances, the inhabitants of Jerusalem felt only the movement from the northeast; they were not paying attention to the western front.[[7]](#footnote-7) Sancheriv’s inscription likewise describes Chizkiyahu being imprisoned within his city “like a bird in a cage,” including a blow to the city gates, which no one could exit. All this would be possible only if a fairly large Assyrian force was spread around Jerusalem. Yeshayahu was in Jerusalem, and described the campaign with great accuracy and in great detail. His description includes the route of the Assyrian soldiers’ progress: they had already reached Nov and could wave from their observation point towards the city that they intended first to besiege and then to invade.

**The salvation of Jerusalem – like Pesach in Egypt (*Yeshayahu* 11; 25-27; 30-31)**

Already in one of his earlier prophecies, Yeshayahu describes the ingathering of exiles like the Exodus from Egypt:[[8]](#footnote-8)

And there shall be a highway for the remnant of His people, that shall remain from Assyria, as there was for Israel in the day that they came up out of the land of Egypt. (*Yeshayahu* 11:16)

In a collection of opaque prophecies (Chapters 24 – 27), Yeshayahu describes the besieged Jerusalem like *Am Yisrael* closed up in their homes for Pesach in Egypt, awaiting the miraculous plague and Exodus:

Come, My people; come into your chambers and shut your doors about you; hide yourself for a little moment, until the indignation is past.

For behold, the Lord comes forth out of His place to visit upon the inhabitants of the earth their iniquity; the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain.

On that day, the Lord, with His rigorous, great, strong sword will punish Leviathan, the elusive serpent [= the Assyrian Empire],[[9]](#footnote-9) and Leviathan the twisting serpent [= the Babylonian Empire], and He will slay the dragon that is in the sea [= the Egyptian Empire]. (26:20 – 27:1)

Yeshayahu describes the great blow that will befall the armies of the nations that are besieging Jerusalem as a banquet of sumptuous food and old wine – like a sort of giant Seder night – at which God will punish all the adversaries who bring death to the world, and cut them off completely, removing the shame of His people all at once:

And on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines of the lees well refined.

And He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering that is cast of all peoples, and the veil that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces, and the reproach of His people He will remove from off all the earth, for the Lord has spoken it. (25:6-8)

This miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem is further described as the opening of the gates with a great song, as the siege is lifted. This description, too, is connected to Pesach, since Bnei Yisrael left Egypt directly from their closed houses, which were opened up all at once:

On that day, this song shall be sung in the land of Yehuda: We have a strong city; He appoints walls and bulwarks for salvation.

[Then shall be fulfilled] Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faithfulness may enter in. (26:1-2)

There is no explicit mention in these opaque chapters of who the enemy is that will gather “on this mountain” and will besiege “the land of Yehuda,” but it becomes clear in the chapters that follow (30-31) that the prophecy is talking about deliverance from the army of Assyria, through blows that will be similar to those experienced by Egypt. God will save Jerusalem from the hand of Assyria, like the miracle of Pesach. The prophet refers to a “song on the night when the festival is sanctified,” a clear allusion to the song of deliverance and thanksgiving on the Seder night:

Behold, the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with His anger burning, and in a thick pillar of smoke, His lips are full of indignation, and His tongue is as a devouring fire; […]

You shall have a song as on the night when the festival is sanctified, and gladness of heart, as when one goes with the pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel.

And the Lord will cause His glorious voice to be heard, and will show the pounding of His arm, with furious anger, and the flame of a devouring fire, with a bursting of clouds and a storm of rain, and hailstones.

For through the voice of the Lord shall Assyria be broken, the rod with which He smote. (30:27-31)[[10]](#footnote-10)

Indeed, according to *Chazal*, this song at night is the source for the singing of Hallel on the Seder night, when the Pesach sacrifice is eaten, and some opinions even deduce from the prophet’s hints that the blow to Sancheriv’s army took place “on that night” (*Melakhim* II 19:35; Radak), on Pesach:

[The Pesach sacrifice in] the first [month] requires the recitation of Hallel as it is eaten. From where do we learn this? R. Yochanan said, in the name of R. Shimon ben Yehotzadak: The verse states, “You shall have a song as on the night when the festival is sanctified” (*Yeshayahu* 30:29). Hence, a night that is sanctified as a festival requires the recitation of Hallel…” (*Pesachim* 95b).

Yeshayahu compares Jerusalem’s salvation to Pesach in even more explicit terms: “like birds hovering… as He passes over (*pasoach*)”; and the fall of Assyria will be “by a sword not of man,” just as in the plagues on Egypt:

As birds hovering, so will the Lord of hosts protect Jerusalem; He will deliver it as He protects it; He will rescue it as He passes over.

Turn to Him against Whom you have deeply rebelled, O children of Israel.

For on that day, they shall cast away every man his idols of silver and his idols of gold, which your own hands have made for you for a sin.

Then Assyria shall fall by the sword not of man, and the word not of men shall devour him, and he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall become tributary.

And his rock shall pass away by reason of terror, and his princes shall be dismayed at the ensign, says the Lord, Whose fire is in Tzion and His furnace in Jerusalem. (31:5-9)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. B. Mazar, “*Masa Sancheriv le-Eretz Yehuda*,” Y. Liever (ed.), *Historia Tzeva’it shel Eretz Yisrael*, Tel Aviv 5724, pp. 286-295; N. Neeman, “*Masa’ot Malkhei Ashur li-Yehuda le-or Te’uda Ashurit Chadasha*,” *Shenaton la-Mikra ve-la-Cheker ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum* II (5737), pp. 165-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. M. Kogan, *Asufat Ketovot Historiot*, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Neeman discovered the two parts of this inscription at two different museums; Neeman, above, n. 1, pp. 164-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some scholars have posited that the emphasis on Lachish in the series of reliefs discovered at Sancheriv’s palace in Nineveh is meant to compensate for his failure in Jerusalem. Chaim Tadmor asserts that throughout the period of the Assyrian Empire, there was not a single additional instance of a rebellious capital city that was not defeated, and therefore Sancheriv had to present Lachish as a substitute for Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yoel Elitzur, *Mechkerei Yehuda ve-Shomron* II (5752), pp. 111-124. His team in Ofra walked the route physically, and found a small fortress and some pottery shards from the period of the monarchy at the Mikhmas pass. See my article, “*Ba al Ayat*…,” *Mechkerei Yehuda ve-Shomron*, pp. 43-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. S.Z. Aster, “*Ha-Reka ha-Histori shel ha-Masa*,” *Shenaton le-Cheker ha-Mikra ve-ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum* 19 (5769), pp. 105-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. B. Mazar, “*Masa* *Sancheriv*,” in Y. Liever (ed), *Historia Tzevait shel Eretz Yisrael*, Jerusalem 5724, p. 292. Mazar proposes that these were Assyrian battalions that came from Shomron, and that for some reason chose a detour. But Assyrian battalions could also have come from Damascus, or from the eastern side of the Jordan, and then gone up via the Mikhmas pass. Recent findings point to an Assyrian encampment against Jerusalem from the end of the 8th century B.C.E. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The same is found in *Mikha* (7:15): “I will show him wondrous deeds, as the days of your departure from the land of Egypt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The serpent (*nachash*), Leviathan, and crocodile (*tanin*) in the Bible are not creatures of mythology (as many believe), but metaphors for the wicked humans of the world, and especially for the great empires of evil and the enemies of Israel, whom God will strike and save His people – as in the song of *Ha’azinu* (*Devarim* 32:33); in *Yeshayahu* (51:9-11); in *Tehillim* (89: 4-47); and more. The identification of the crocodile with Pharaoh the king of Egypt is hinted in the Torah (*Shemot* 7:9-12) and explicit in *Yechezkel* (29:3-4): “Mighty monster, sprawling in its channels...” In my opinion, these images of the Leviathan allude to the Chidekel River (the straight one), upon which Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, sat, and to the Euphrates River (long and curved), upon which Babylon sat. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Radak there. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)