Yeshayahu and His Disciples, From the Time of Menashe Until the Destruction (3)

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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

# Yeshayahu and His Disciples,

**Shiur #27: Yeshayahu and His Disciples, From the Time of Menashe Until the Destruction (4)**

**Complete Redemption vs. Catastrophic Destruction**

**The Vision and the Reality (Chapters 60-64)**

Chapters 40-49 of *Sefer Yeshayahu* open with the famous line: "Be comforted; be comforted, My people" (40:1) and offer prophecies of redemption – in the midst of profound and fierce rebuke of Jews who have taken to idolatry, in a trend of unprecedented scope and intensity, as a result of the attempt by Menashe and his cabal to integrate into the broader political and cultural environment.

The prophet reverts to the fundamental principles of *Sefer Bereishit*. We might summarize the essence of his message as follows: Believe what I say! I bear God's word. “I am the Lord; there is no other!”[[1]](#footnote-1) How can you turn to wooden idols, which are powerless, while lighting the other half of the same piece of wood for cooking and baking?

Chapters 50-59[[2]](#footnote-2) contain prophecies of redemption and repentance in the midst of horrific descriptions of the execution of the "servant of God," the spilling of innocent blood, and the abominations of pagan worship, including the offering of children to Molekh.

In Chapters 60-62, we find (finally) abundant descriptions of consolation and salvation, delivered in the form of ecstatic song, without any frightening rebuke. What has happened?

We discover the ghastly answer in Chapters 61 and 63-64, chapters of vengeance and destruction: Tzion and Jerusalem have been completely destroyed; there is total desolation.

It is precisely when the destruction reaches its climax that the consolation, too, pours forth in all its might, for only this wondrous vision of the future can provide the strength to withstand the terrible reality:

To comfort all who mourn;

To appoint for those who mourn in Tzion, to give them a garland in place of ashes… (*Yeshayahu* 61:2-3)

The same phenomenon characterizes Yirmiyahu’s prophecies of consolation (Chapters 30-31), which are uttered on the brink of the destruction. (*Yirmiyahu* 32 records the dates of the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem).

Prophecies were never uttered at the time of their realization.

**Edom and Yehuda (Chapter 63)**

One of the high points in the prophecies of redemption is control over the territories of Edom. Edom dwelled to the south of Yehuda – in the mountains of the Negev, in the craters, and in the northeastern Sinai on the way to Eilat – as well as in the high mountains of Edom to the east of the Arava.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yitzchak dwelled in Be'er Sheva. The area from Be'er Sheva/Arad southward was inherited by Esav, and the area to the north belonged to Yaakov. After King David smote the Amalekites, removing the deadly threat that they represented and seizing control of the Edomite territory, Shlomo could sail in ships from Etzion Gever (with his Phoenician friends – *Melakhim* I 9:26-28), and even the Queen of Sheva paid a royal visit all the way from Ethiopia (ibid. 10) – seemingly, for the purpose of shrinking the level of Phoenician involvement. After the splitting of the kingdom, Yehuda was greatly weakened, and the Edomites made trouble on the border of Yehuda. A clay shard dating to the end of the First Temple period, discovered at the fortress at Tel Arad, is inscribed with an urgent military order to send soldiers to the mountains of the Negev “lest Edom come there.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Amos (9:12) concluded his prophecy of the future redemption with the domination of Edom by Yehuda; thus in *Ovadia* as well (1:19-21), and Yeshayahu conveys this message twice.

One prophecy of terrible destruction for Edom already appeared in *Yeshayahu* Chapter 34,[[5]](#footnote-5) and the text there hints to the bloody history between Yehuda and Edom.[[6]](#footnote-6) Among other things, Edomite slave merchants would buy captives from Yehuda (and elsewhere) at the slave markets of Gaza and Tyre, and sell them in distant places (as in *Amos* 1:6-11). This phenomenon intensified at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem; the Edomites actively aided the Babylonians in reducing the city to ruins, handing over refugees from Yehuda who tried to escape and selling captives as slaves.

The prophet Ovadia, in particular, rails against Edom:

For the violence done to your brother, Yaakov – shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever.

On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried away his substance, and foreigners entered his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, you too were like one of them…

Nor should you have stood at the crossroads, to cut off those of him that escaped, nor should you have delivered up those of his that remained in the day of distress. (*Ovadia* 1:10-14)

The proximity of Yeshayahu’s second prophecy against Edom to the lament of destruction (*Yeshayahu* 63:7 through the end of Chapter 64) indicates its time period: following the destruction of Jerusalem.

The anger and pain at Edom burst forth in exactly this way in the psalm of destruction at the end of *Tehillim*. In juxtaposition to the oath, "If I forget you Jerusalem, let my right hand forget [her cunning]" (*Tehillim* 137:5), we find mention of Edom's encouragement of the Babylonians engaged in destroying the city:

Remember, O Lord, against the children of Edom, the day of Jerusalem, saying, “Raze it, raze it, even to its foundation." (137:7)

Likewise in *Eikha*:

Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, who dwells in the land of Utz; the cup [of pain] shall pass over to you, too; you shall be drunken and shall make yourself naked.

The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Tzion; He will not carry you away into captivity any more. He will punish your iniquity, O daughter of Edom; He will uncover your sins. (*Eikha* 4:21-22)

A recent exceptional discovery made at Sela (es-Sela, "Sela Edom")[[7]](#footnote-7) sheds light on the prophecies against Edom. The last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, is "he [who] comes from Edom, with crimsoned garments" (63:1), covered in blood after having laid waste to Botzra and “Sela Edom.” The prophets view him as a special emissary of God to punish Edom for their arrogance and their active participation in the destruction of Jerusalem.

A giant inscription discovered on the rocks of the Edomite fortress describes Nabonidus as an actual king, "in glorious garb" – but this was the last Babylonian victory before Cyrus's declaration.

For the day of vengeance that was in My heart, and My year of redemption, have come. (63:4)

**Psalms of Destruction in *Yeshayahu* and *Tehillim***

**Prophetic Vision vs. Bitter Reality (Chapter 63:7 – end of Chapter 64)**

In general, we can point to significant connections between *Yeshayahu* and *Tehillim*. Chapter 12 of *Yeshayahu* includes an entire psalm of thanksgiving as an integral part (and rousing conclusion) of the prophecy of redemption and the ingathering of the exiles. In addition, *Chazal*[[8]](#footnote-8) identify the fragments of a psalm scattered among the chapters on the salvation of Jerusalem (24-27). Chizkiyahu's psalm of gratitude upon being healed of his sickness (38:9-20) appears only in Yeshayahu; there is no hint of it in the parallel chapters in *Melakhim*.

Yeshayahu's disciples continued his prophetic tradition, with its lofty concepts and lyrical style, from the time of Menashe until the destruction of Jerusalem, which is recorded in the last historical psalm (63:7 – end of 64).

I will make mention of the mercies of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord according to all that the Lord has bestowed on us… (63:7)

The praising of God's mercies is introduced in the prophetic psalm with a recollection of Moshe's song at the time of the Exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the sea:

They rebelled and grieved His holy spirit…

Then His people remembered the ancient days, of Moshe…

Who divided the water before them…

Who led them through the deep, as a horse in the wilderness, without stumbling. (63:10-13)

This is reminiscent of *Tehillim*:

Who can express the mighty acts of the Lord, or make heard all His praise?...

And He rebuked the Reed Sea, and it was dried up; and He led them through the depths, as through a wilderness…

They forgot God, their Savior, Who had done great things in Egypt… (*Tehillim* 106: 2,9,21)

After the recollection of the Exodus in *Yeshayahu* comes a great cry in view of the terrible destruction:

Look down from heaven and see…

Where is Your zeal and Your mighty acts? (Ibid. 15)

Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Tzion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation… (64:10).

This cry recalls that of Yirmiyahu (32:16-25), in his final prayer,[[9]](#footnote-9) and those of the psalms of destruction in *Tehillim* (69, 74, 79, 80, 89):

Why, O God, have You cast us off forever? (74:1)

Arise, O God; plead Your own cause… (Ibid. 22)

How long, O Lord, will You be angry forever? (79:5)

How long, O Lord, will You hide Yourself forever? (89:47)

O God of hosts – return, we beseech You; look from heaven and behold…

Cause Your face to shine, that we may be saved. (80:15,20)

The *beit midrash* of psalmists was maintained in Jerusalem from the time of David until after the Destruction. The disciples of King David, Asaf, and Eitan ha-Ezrachi continued to utter Divinely inspired psalms in the style of their masters. Yeshayahu and his disciples were partners in this endeavor, *within their prophecies*. Like the psalmists of *Tehillim* who followed King David's example, the disciples of Yeshayahu continued to prophesy in his style and spirit until the concluding psalm.

**The Struggle Against Foreign Worship by Jews (Chapters 65-66)**

The closing chapters of *Sefer Yeshayahu* (65-66) return to the struggle against (Jewish) idolaters who engage in foreign, offensive forms of worship: "sacrificing in gardens and burning incense upon bricks… Sitting among the graves… eating swines' flesh…" (65:3-4). These behaviors had spread extensively through Yehuda during the time of Menashe, as part of a trend of giving up on the way of God and assimilating into the pagan environment. These phenomena continued in Yehuda and in Jerusalem until the Destruction, as attested by Yirmiyahu (7:19).

Nevertheless, the introduction is surprising. It presents God as pleading, as it were, to His people:

I gave access to them to those who did not ask for it; I was at hand for them who did not seek Me. I said, “Here I am – here I am” to a nation that was not called by My Name. I have spread out My hands all the day for a rebellious people that walk in a way that is not good, after their own thoughts. (65:1-2)

Is there still a "people" to speak of? Many have already been exiled from the north and from the lowlands of Yehuda (during the time of Chizkiyahu). Among those left in Yehuda, many have no desire to call in God's Name, or even to belong to God's people.

The prophetic answer to this question (which can be traced to the beginning of Yeshayahu’s path – Chapter 4 and the end of Chapter 6) is that there is a "remnant," comprising the faithful “servants of God":

Thus said the Lord… so shall I do for the sake of My servants, that I may not destroy all.

And I will bring forth a seed out of Yaakov, and out of Yehuda an inheritor of My mountains, and My elect shall inherit it, and My servants shall dwell there. (65:8-9)

In contrast to the reigning confusion that has caused much suffering for the servants of God, there will come a day when the differentiation between God's servants and those who abandoned Him will be clear:

Behold, My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry. Behold, My servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty. Behold, My servants shall rejoice, but you shall be ashamed. (Ibid. 13)

Then, the world will be created anew – the heavens and the earth – in a Jerusalem of joy, with no weeping or crying out, and with wondrous long life. Even the "sinner" will reach the age of a hundred.

How will this miracle come about? By virtue of those who kept the flame burning; whose branches are renewed like an old tree, with the earlier generations adhering dryly to the trunk, supporting the channels of life deep within.

For as the days of a tree shall be the days of My people… for they are the seed blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them. (Ibid. 22-23)

This is an exact parallel to the first messianic prophecy in *Yeshayahu* (11:1-9), and once again we see how Yeshayahu and the disciples who continue his path may all be viewed as a single prophetic voice:

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall neither hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, says the Lord. (Ibid. 25)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Yeshayahu* 45:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See previous *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Today, Edom is erroneously imagined as having occupied only the mountains to the east of the Arava, which was never a boundary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Y. Aharoni*, Ketovot Arad* (Jerusalem 5736), inscription 24, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is for this reason that some scholars have connected Chapters 34-35 in *Yeshayahu* with Chapters 40-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Melakhim* I 11:14-16; *Melakhim* II 3:8-9; 8:20-22; 14:7; 16:6; *Amos* 1:11-12; *Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 25:11-12. For more on the letter from Arad regarding the war with Edom at the end of the First Temple Period, see Y. Aharoni, ibid., inscription 24, pp. 48-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The discovery is described in articles on the Sela fortresses by A. and T. Raz, A. Uchitel, and Ch. Ben-David, *Katedra* 101 (Mar-Cheshvan 5762). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Sanhedrin* 94a. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See my articles, "*Nevuat ha-Tefila le-Avraham*" (*Me-Avraham Ad Yirmiyahu*) and "*Reshit Tefillat ha-Keva*" on my website. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)