



Va'erah: Ezekiel 28:24-29:21

The destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE was neither the first nor last Babylonian attack against Judah. Eleven years earlier, in 597, they besieged Jerusalem and exiled its king, Jeconiah, prominent royals, artisans, and priests - including Ezekiel - to Babylon.

In the Haftarah's uplifting first verses, God promises to redeem His exiled people, punish their oppressors and return them to dwell in their Land and radiate His sanctity. These promises mirror the Parashah's opening promises about God redeeming the Israelites to establish them as His people in His Land.

The Haftarah then addresses the central question facing Judah in Tevet, 586, a year into Babylon's second, devastating siege of Jerusalem: should it continue to ally with Egypt against the Babylonians, or should it capitulate to Babylon, with hopes to save its remaining people, Jerusalem, and the Temple? Ezekiel and God favor the latter. During the first siege of Judah in 597, Egypt had been a useless, "weak reed" ally, fleeing the battlefield against Babylon. In terms reminiscent of the Parashah's plagues, Ezekiel foretells that God will destroy Egypt, exile it for forty years, and then return its survivors to Southern Egypt - so distant from Judah that it won't rely upon Egypt again. As in the Parashah, God emphasizes that this will show Egypt that, contrary to their belief in Pharaoh as the Nile's god-creator, He alone controls the world.

The Haftarah concludes in 570, sixteen years after Babylon conquered Jerusalem. God's instrument in human history, Babylon, will carry out His punishment of Egypt by conquering it; Babylon's soldiers will receive its plunder. With Egypt destroyed, God will redeem and cause Israel to flourish in the Land.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 28:24-26: By returning His exiled people to dwell securely in its Land and punishing its neighboring enemies, all nations will recognize God's sanctity.

Ezekiel 28:25	יחזקאל כ"ח:כ"ה
So says the Lord God: "When I gather in the house of Israel from the peoples among whom they are scattered and am sanctified through them in the sight of the nations, [then] they shall dwell in their land that I have given to my servant, Jacob."	כֹּה-אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה' בְּקִבְצֵי אֶת-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר נִפְצוּ בָם וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בָם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם וְיָשׁוּבוּ עַל-אֲדָמָתָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְעַבְדֵי לְיַעֲקֹב:

Verses 29:1-7: After God destroys Egypt and its Pharaoh for claiming to be a creator god of the Nile, and for betraying Judah, particularly during the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, Egyptians will know God's might.

Ezekiel 29:3	יחזקאל כ"ט:ג
Speak and say: "So says the Lord God: 'Behold I am upon you, O Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great crocodile crouching in the midst of its streams [the northern Nile delta], who has said, 'My River is mine, and I have made it for myself!'"	דַּבֵּר וְאָמַרְתָּ כֹּה-אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה' הִנְנִי עָלֶיךָ פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם הַתַּנִּים הַגְּדוֹל הַרְבֵּץ בְּתוֹךְ אַרְצוֹ אֲמַר לִי יַאֲרִי וְאֲנִי עָשִׂיתִנִּי:

Verses 29:8-12: From Migdol in Egypt's north, to Sevan (near modern-day Aswan) in its middle, and southward towards Ethiopia, God will utterly desolate Egypt and exile its people for forty years.

Ezekiel 29:12	יחזקאל כ"ט:י"ב
I will make the land of Egypt desolate amidst wasted lands, and its cities shall be desolate amidst ruined cities for forty years. I will scatter Egypt among nations, and disperse them through the lands.	וְנָתַתִּי אֶת-אַרְצוֹ מִצְרַיִם שְׂמָמָה בְּתוֹךְ אֲרָצוֹת נְשֻׁמוֹת וְעָרֶיהָ בְּתוֹךְ עָרִים מְחֻרְבוֹת תַּהְיֶינָה שְׂמָמָה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וְהִפְצַלְתִּי אֶת-מִצְרַיִם בַּגּוֹיִם וְזָרִיתִים בְּאַרְצוֹת:

Verses 29:13-16: God will return the surviving Egyptians to their point of ethnic origin in southern Egypt. It will be too small and weak to ever again oppress others. It will also be far from Judah, which will never rely on it again.

Ezekiel 29:14	יחזקאל כ"ט:י"ד
I will return the captivity of Egypt and cause them to return to the [southern] land of Pathros, [to dwell upon] the land of their origin. There, they shall be a lowly kingdom.	וּשְׁבַתִּי אֶת־שָׁבוֹת מִצְרַיִם וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי אֹתָם אֶרֶץ פַּתְרוֹס עַל־אֶרֶץ מְכוֹרְתָם וְהָיוּ שָׁם מַמְלָכָה שְׁפִלָּה:

Verses 29:17-21: Sixteen years after destroying the Temple, Babylon failed to conquer Tyre¹, to Israel's north. God nonetheless rewards Babylon by delivering Egypt to it. Israel will flourish and will heed Ezekiel's words.

Ezekiel 29:19	יחזקאל כ"ט:י"ט
Therefore, thus says the Lord God: "Behold I will give Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon, the land of Egypt. He shall take its multitude[s], its spoils, and its prey as wages for his army."	לָכֵן כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה' הִנְנִי נֹתֵן לְנְבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ־בָּבֶל אֶת־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְנִשְׂאָה הַמֶּלֶךְ וְשָׁלַל שְׁלָלָהּ וַיִּגְזַן בָּזָה וְהִיתָה שָׂכָר לְחֵילוֹ:

Haftarah Egyptology

Ezekiel's calling Pharaoh "the great crocodile" (see 29:3, above) refers to the pictured Egyptian crocodile deity, Sobek. As early as Narmer, the first Pharaoh of Egypt, Sobek was worshiped as a fertility god connected with the flooding of the Nile. During the Middle Kingdom Period (c. 2055–1650 BCE) Sobek was combined with Ra, the chief god of Egypt, thereby becoming associated with the Pharaohs and their dynasties. He then became known as the creator of the Nile and the world. Many mummified crocodiles have been discovered at his main center of worship, Crocodilopolis.²



Connections

The Midrash derives a **meaning of Moses's sign of the snake-like staff** from the Haftarah.

Shemot Rabbah 9:4	שמות רבה ט:ד
Why did [God] say to them [Moses and Aaron] that the sign would be of a serpentine creature? Because Pharaoh is compared to a serpentine creature, as (Ezek. 29:3) says, "The great [serpentine] crocodile crouching in the midst of its rivers." When Moses would depart Pharaoh's presence, [Pharaoh] would say, "If Amram's son [Moses] comes to me, I will kill him, I will crucify him, and I will burn him." Yet when Moses entered [Pharaoh's presence], Pharaoh immediately "became a staff" [unable to act on his threats.]	לָמָּה אָמַר לָהֶם גַּם שֶׁל תַּנִּין, לָפִי שֶׁפָּרַעַה נִדְמָה לְתַנִּין, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יחזקאל כט, ג): הַתַּנִּים הַגְּדוֹל הַרְבִּיץ בְּתוֹךְ יַאֲרִיו, כְּשֶׁהָיָה מֹשֶׁה יוֹצֵא מֵאֶצֶל פָּרַעַה הָיָה אוֹמֵר אִם יָבוֹא אֶצְלִי כֵּן עֲמַרְם אֲנִי הוֹרְגוֹ אֲנִי צוֹלְבוֹ וְאֲנִי שׂוֹרְפוֹ, וְכִשְׁהָיָה מֹשֶׁה נִכְנָס מִיַּד נַעֲשֶׂה פָּרַעַה מִשָּׂה.

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¹ Tyre was a powerful Phoenician mercantile city on a small island off the coast of Southern Lebanon. It had colonies and traded all over the ancient world. In chapters 26-28, Ezekiel rebukes it for its rejoicing in the trading windfall it would receive upon the downfall of its trading competitor, Jerusalem; for its ruler's self-deification; for its immoral trading practices, and for their resulting moral desecration of its idolatrous temples. Ezekiel declares that God will therefore send Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army to destroy it and its wealth. The Babylonians worked mightily to besiege the isle; 29:18 describes its soldier's hard labors, and possibly their resulting bodily afflictions. The siege failed, so the soldiers collected no spoils - their customary pay. For their efforts while carrying out His will to punish Tyre, God rewards Nebuchadnezzar with conquest of Egypt, and "pays" the soldiers who besieged Tyre with Egypt's booty.

² Thanks to Nachliel Selevan for providing this insight.