

In the previous article, we commented on the call of the prophet Ezekiel (chapters 1-3) and on a series of oracles, many of them acted out against Jerusalem.

In this article, we will comment on the following:

- Ezekiel's oracles against the nations (chapters 25-32)
- The prophet's words of comfort: prophecies of restoration and promise of a better future (chapters 33-39)
- Vision of a new Temple and a new community (chapters 40-48)

CHAPTERS 25-32: Oracles against the nations

Chapters 25-32 form a unit clearly distinct from the chapters before the siege of Jerusalem (3-24) and those after the fall of the city (33-39). In some of the most exquisite poetry in the book, Ezekiel declares God's vengeance against neighboring countries that have violated the covenant people: Ammon (25:1-7), Moab (25:8-11), Edom (25:12-14), Philistia (25:15-17), Tyre (26:1-28:19), Sidon (28:20-26), and Egypt (29:1-23:32).

The oracles against foreign nations in these chapters contain some of Ezekiel's most powerful imagery. He hurls threats against the seven nations mentioned above. These represent the foreign powers which oppose Israel in the Promised Land. Of the seven nations, Tyre and Egypt receive the most severe judgment because they represent the allure of false gods. Three chapters are given to Tyre, imaged as a beautiful ship, and four chapters to Egypt, imaged as a crocodile. The pride of Pharaoh, who considers himself a god, constitutes the chief sin of Egypt. While Israel suffers, its pagan neighbors should not gloat over its destruction.

PART 4: WORDS OF COMFORT AND PROMISE OF SALVATION FOR ISRAEL (CHAPTERS 33-39)

In this section of Ezekiel, we come to some of the best known and most important chapters of the book, i.e., chapters 34, 36, and 37.

The fall of Jerusalem is a turning point in Ezekiel's message. Prior to her fall, Ezekiel only offered

messages of doom to the exiles, seeking to drive home the message that God was not going to save Jerusalem. Once the exiles got that message, Ezekiel felt he had a chance to convert them. In these chapters, the *tormentor* becomes the *comforter*. The exiles—now in despair over the destruction of Jerusalem—need a message of hope. Once the exiles realize that their sins caused the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Ezekiel can call them to repentance, hope and purification. He will now be able to speak to a people who will no longer scoff at him, but will listen with humility. He will no longer have to restrict himself to preaching around his own house.

CHAPTER 33: The parable of the watchman

"...I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me." (v.7)

"...The virtue which a man has practiced will not save him on the day that he sins; neither will the wickedness that a man has done bring about his downfall on the day that he turns from his wickedness." (v.12)

"Your countrymen say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' But it is their way that is not fair." (v.17)

"They think that you are only a ballad singer with a pleasant voice. ...But the time is coming when they will know that a true prophet was among them." (vv 32-33)

Chapter 33 recalls earlier themes already mentioned in this book: Ezekiel as watchman (see 3:16-21) and individual responsibility for one's actions (ch.18).

Verses 1-9—Ezekiel as Israel's watchman. Part of the prophet's job is to watch and warn the wicked. His warnings and judgments are designed to lead Israel to the knowledge that God stands ready to forgive those who have turned from their wicked ways.

Verses 10-20—Individual responsibility. Ezekiel seeks to refute those who believe that they are being punished for the sins of those who lived before them. Ezekiel states that this is not true, and that God will punish them only for the sins they have committed.

Verses 23-29—Survivors in Judah. Those who remain in Judah believe that God will restore the land through them. But Ezekiel warns them that as they continue to commit the same sins after the fall of Jerusalem, only more devastation awaits them.

Verses 30-33—The prophet’s false popularity. God speaks directly to Ezekiel about his effectiveness as a prophet. Even though he is popular, his message is not heeded. To the exiles, he is only a clever entertainer. However, God declares that in the near future, the people will recognize him as a true prophet.

Pause: What verse speaks to you most in chapter 33?

In chapters 34-37, through a series of *contrasts* involving the leaders, the land and the people, Ezekiel paints for the exiles a picture of a happy future in which God will shepherd them, the land will be prosperous, and the people will rise from a tomb of exile to exist once more as a unified nation.

CHAPTER 34: Judgment on the false shepherds; God as true Shepherd

“...Thus says the Lord God: ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves. Should not shepherds, rather, pasture sheep?’” (v.2)

“...I myself will look after and tend my sheep.” (v.11)

“...I will lead them back to their country....” (v.13)

“The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal... shepherding them in justice.” (v.16)

“...I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats.” (v.17)

Ezekiel contrasts Judah’s last kings and bad shepherds with God, the Good Shepherd, who will lead his flock and set up for them one shepherd, the Messiah.

Verses 17-31—The flock and its future. Having condemned the shepherds for their failures, Ezekiel recognizes that the sheep themselves are not free of sin. Some of the stronger ones fail by exploiting the weaker ones (vv 17-20). In verses 23-31, the prophet declares that God will establish a new shepherd to take care of his people (a veiled reference to the coming Messiah).

CHAPTER 35: Condemnation of Edom

“‘Because you never let die your hatred for the Israelites, whom you delivered over to the power of the sword at the time of their trouble, when their crimes came to an end, therefore, as I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘you have been guilty of blood, and blood, I swear, shall pursue you. I will make Mount Seir a desolate waste, and cut off from it any traveler.’” (vv 5-7)

Edom and its high place Mount Seir receives a prophecy of doom for its enmity towards Israel. It will never be allowed to take over the land of Israel.

CHAPTER 36: Regeneration of the land and the people

“As for you mountains of Israel, you shall grow branches and bear fruit for my people Israel....” (v.8)

“For I will take you away from among the nations, gather you from all the foreign lands, and bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees. You shall live in the land I gave your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (vv 24-28)

In contrast to the dire future predicted for Mount Seir and the Edomites, Ezekiel promises a prosperous future both for the *land* and *people* of Israel. The mountains of Israel shall grow branches and bear fruit and the scattered people will be purified from their sins and returned to their land.

Verses 16-37—Regeneration of the people. This section can be subdivided into four parts:

- **Verses 16-21.** The land is defiled by the people’s sinfulness.
- **Verses 22-23.** God is restoring Israel not because of her repentance but in order to protect the holiness of his name. The restoration of Israel will serve as a witness of the magnanimity of God, even in the face of the people’s unworthiness.
- **Verses 24-32** speak about the manner of Israel’s restoration: a) God will ritually clean the people

from past impurities and idols; b) God will give the people new hearts and spirits; c) God will animate their human hearts with the divine spirit so they will have the inner power to live by God's statutes and decrees.

- **Verses 33-36** promise that when Israel is rebuilt, other nations will recognize God's power.

CHAPTER 37: Vision of the dry bones

"...The Lord set me in the center of the plain, which was now filled with dry bones." (v.1)

"Then he said to me: 'Prophecy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'" (v.4)

"...See I will bring spirit into you that you may have life." (v.5)

"...O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you to the land of Israel." (v.12)

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones is probably the best known chapter of the book. It describes a dramatic scene (vv 1-10) accompanied by an interpretation (vv 11-14). The vision occurs at a time when the exiles have lost all hope in the future now that Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed. Despairingly, they cry out: *"Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, and we are cut off"* (v.11).

The Lord leads Ezekiel out to a plain filled with numerous dry bones and asks: *"Can these bones come to life?"* Ezekiel responds: *"You alone know it"* (v.3). God then instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the dead bones so that a new spirit, sinews, flesh, skin, and breath will revive the bones (vv 4-6). Ezekiel does as told and hears a great noise as sinews, flesh and skin cover the bones, but no spirit comes into them (vv 7-8). In a second instruction, God tells him to call the spirit from the four winds to come and breathe life into the slain (v.9). Again Ezekiel does as commanded, and the spirit revives a great upright army of live bodies (v.10).

In this vision, God declares that those whose hope has turned to despair will be led from their experience of death to new life in the land of Israel (vv 11-12). The Lord will burst the bonds of the grave to restore the people to new political existence. The new life that the Lord will grant will revive both their understanding of God and their life in the land.

The allegory of the two sticks (vv 15-28) describes the reunion of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) under the Messiah, and the everlasting new covenant that God will make with his people.

Pause: Nationally or personally, can you give an example of God bringing life to what seemed like a hopeless situation?

CHAPTERS 38-39: Prophecies against Gog

These two chapters have been recognized by scholars as very complex and difficult to interpret. *The Collegeville Bible Handbook* states:

"This is an apocalyptic vision, similar to Isaiah 24-27. It tells of the coming of a massive force against Israel, after Israel's restoration to the homeland. It may be considered a mythical world power designed to emphasize God's protection of Israel." (p.131)

PART 5: THE NEW ISRAEL (CHAPTERS 40-48)

The closing section of the Book of Ezekiel is an idealized vision of the restoration of a new Israel to the homeland. Renewed life is now rightly centered on the Temple.

Commenting on these final chapters of Ezekiel, Diane Bergant writes:

"The final chapters of the book recount the vision of the new Temple and the new cult. The prophet had a vision in which he was led by the hand of God through the gates of the new Temple into the outer court, the inner court, and finally into the interior of the Temple itself. While facing east, he watched the glory of God return to the Temple to abide there once again (43:1-4). From the threshold of this reconstructed Temple flowed a stream that grew into a vast river (47:1-12). Like the waters that originated in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:10-14), this river was the source of life for plants and animals. The hopeful note on which the message of this prophet ends is obvious. Once purified, the Temple would become again the place where God dwelt in the midst of a chastised and reconstituted nation, and from this Temple would flow life-giving power." (Israel's Story, Part 2, p.40)

CHAPTERS 40-42: Restoration of the Temple

“The Lord came upon me and brought me in divine visions to the land of Israel....” (v.2)

“The man standing at the gate said to me, ‘Son of man, look carefully and listen intently, and pay strict attention to all that I will show you.... Tell the house of Israel all that you see.’”(v.4)

These three chapters describe the idealized restored temple: the man with a measure (40:1-5), east gate (40:6-16), outer court (40:17-19), south gate (40:28-29), north gate (40:35-37), side rooms (40:38-17), temple building (40:48-41:15), interior of the temple (41:15-26), other structures (42:1-14), and outer court (42:15-20).

CHAPTER 43: Restoration of the Temple

“...I fell prone... as the glory of the Lord entered the temple by way of the gate which faces the east.” (vv 3-4)

“...And I saw that the temple was filled with the glory of the Lord.”(v.5)

“The voice said to me: ‘Son of man, this is where my throne shall be.... I will dwell among the Israelites forever....’” (v.7)

We find a description of restored worship in the temple (43:1-9) in which the prophet sees the return of God’s glory to the restored temple through the east gate, from which it had departed as a sign of judgment in 11:22.

CHAPTERS 44 to 47:12: The new law

Ezekiel is given the statutes and laws of the Lord’s house with respect to: admission to the temple (44:4-9), Levites (44:10-14), priests (44:15-31), the sacred tract of land (45:1-8), weights and measures (45:9-12), offerings (45:13-17), Passover and Feast of Booths (45:18-25), Sabbaths (46:1-7), ritual laws (46:8-15), the prince and the land (46:16-18), temple kitchens (46:19-24), the wonderful stream (47:1-12), see Gen 2:10-14; Rev. 22. The final vision (47:1-2) shows the temple in Jerusalem as a great source of life. (The Collegeville Bible Handbook p. 130)

CHAPTER 47:13 to 48:35: The New Israel

The word of God comes to Ezekiel concerning the boundaries and internal division of Israel’s restored land. When the people enter Palestine for the first time, each tribe is allocated land. Now the prophet sees a new return from exile and a new division of territory amongst the chosen people.

Concluding word

In his book *Salvation History—A Biblical Theology*, Fr. Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., writes:

“Ezekiel’s preaching was a success. His was the voice which the people heard in the dark days when they had almost given up all hope. He might be called the Joseph of the Babylonian captivity, for he it was who, in the providence of God, had been exiled in advance of his fellow countrymen to preserve the remnant of Judah in its faith and trust. He would not live to see the exodus from Babylon, just as Joseph did not witness the return from Egypt. Yet the work of each was necessary for the two returns.”(p.117)

Resources

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Men and Message of the Old Testament, Peter Ellis
- The Daily Bible Study Series—Ezekiel