

**Ezekiel**  
Week 12  
*Lament and Promise*  
*Chapters 19-20:44*

**Lament for the Princes of Israel (19)**

A lament was a common and distinctive form of song, frequently sung at a funeral, extolling the virtues of the departed and grieving the tragic circumstances surrounding the person's death. A classic example is found in 2 Samuel 1:19–27, where David mourns the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. In the hands of the prophets, however, the genre underwent a change of perspective, for the catalogue of virtues of the departed became a list of faults, while the tragic circumstances of the demise were projected into the future rather than simply recorded from the past.<sup>1</sup>

The lioness mentioned here was Judah. Back in Genesis 49:9, Jacob had referred to his son Judah in this manner: “You are a lion’s cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?” Ezekiel now applied this picture to the descendants of Judah. Like a mighty lion, the nation of Judah had become strong and respected among the other nations of the world.<sup>2</sup>

The first image is of a mother lioness who produces a number of cubs. Out of them, she chooses one to be the leader of the pack. He behaves in lionlike fashion, tearing the prey and even consuming people (19:3). As a result, he is hunted by the nations, captured, and carried off to Egypt (19:4). In his place, she appoints a second cub, who acts with even greater destructiveness (19:6–7). He too is hunted by the nations, captured, and carried into exile, this time to Babylon.<sup>3</sup>

As with the imagery of Ezekiel 16–17, historical facts are built into the picture, resulting in an occasionally incongruous mixture of metaphor and reality. The first cub clearly represents Jehoahaz, who, after a brief three-month reign in 609 b.c., was carried off to Egypt by Pharaoh Neco (2 Kings 23:33–34).<sup>4</sup>

*he was caught ... pit ... hooks.* Together with vv 8–9, likely outlines ancient practices for capturing and controlling a lion. The animal was surrounded, driven by cries to a pit, netted, subdued with hooked poles, and bound.

*waited in vain.* Hbr implies that the first lion disappointed the mother’s expectations. *another of her cubs.* The second king was Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim and nephew of Jehoahaz (vv 5–9; cf 2Ki 24:8–15).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 246). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Kuschel, K. B. (1986). *Ezekiel* (p. 103). Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House.

<sup>3</sup> Duguid, 247

<sup>4</sup> Duguid, 247

<sup>5</sup> Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1340). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

The identity of the second lion has been the object of much debate. The primary choices are Jehoiachin, with whom Ezekiel was exiled, or Zedekiah, his successor, who was exiled in 586 b.c. If the lion metaphor is taken as a separate unit, then Zedekiah is probably the best choice. However, if the entire chapter is viewed as a two-image picture, with a change of metaphor between the first and second images, then Jehoiachin fits best as the second lion, while Zedekiah is then reserved for the second image, that of a vine and its branches.<sup>11</sup> Although much attention has been devoted to the question, the meaning of the passage is not significantly altered by which identification is adopted; the point is that the current rulers of Judah are simply the latest outcroppings of the rock of oppression and pride from which they were hewn.<sup>6</sup>

The vine and stems symbolize the royal dynasty of Judah and the kings of Judah. Ezekiel uses wordplay in choosing *matteh* for “stem” or “branch” since the word more often means “staff” and can be a mark of leadership.<sup>7</sup>

There is a strong parallel between this symbol in Ezekiel and the “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5:1–7. In both instances God’s wrath against the vineyard is the result of failed expectations. Neither plant performed its proper role. Isaiah’s vineyard produced “bad fruit,” while Ezekiel’s vineyard grew “high above the thick foliage,” but there is little mention of fruit. All of its energy had gone to extending its branches farther and farther, a symbol for the hubris of the nation of Judah and her kings (Jehoiachin and Zedekiah). The fate is the same for these vineyards. They both become wastelands, dried by the winds, broken down with no root or branch remaining. Ezekiel in this way provides the basis for a lament over the end of the nation’s independence and the setting aside of God’s covenant with the House of David.<sup>8</sup>

Ezekiel may have written the lamentation over Zedekiah after the fall of Jerusalem. However, a dirge may also be prophetic of a future calamity (cf Am 5). *become a lamentation*. Encloses or frames the passages (circling back to v 1). The wording also hints that Ezekiel wrote the lament for the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC and so affirmed that his prophecy would come true.<sup>9</sup>

### **Israel’s Rebellion and God’s Promise (20:1-44)**

Inspired by another visit from Israel’s elders, Ezekiel recaps Israel’s idolatry, describing a history of almost constant rebellion. His summary focuses on the people’s responsibility for their sin and omits reference to prominent figures like Moses or to non-Israelite enticements to sin. It also emphasizes events outside the promised land, a historical situation that would have new significance for the exiles’ current situation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Duguid, 248-249

<sup>7</sup> Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eze 19:11). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

<sup>8</sup> Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 19:10–14). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>9</sup> Engelbrecht, 1340

<sup>10</sup> Barry, et al, 20:1–32

Based on the year in which Jehoiachin and his court were taken into Babylonian exile, this date formula would correlate to August 15, 591 b.c. It is possible that it could refer to 593 if one were counting from the beginning of the year when Jehoiachin became king in Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

The way in which Ezekiel challenges the elders with Israel's history has more than a little in common with chapter 18. It is essentially a story of three consecutive generations, with intended application to the present generation. The choice laid before each generation is obedience to the Lord's life-giving laws (Ezek. 20:11, 21; cf. 18:9) or death-dealing disobedience (20:23–25; cf. 18:13). The three generations Ezekiel chooses here for his case study are the generation who lived in Egypt at the time of the Exodus (20:5–10), the desert generation (vv. 11–15), and their children (vv. 18–23). Each generation's history is presented as a six-stage cycle:

- (1) The Lord's self-revelation (vv. 5–6, 11, 18–19)
- (2) A challenge to exclusive devotion (vv. 7, 12, 19–20)
- (3) Israel's rebellion (vv. 8, 13, 21)
- (4) The threat of the Lord's wrath (vv. 8b, 13b, 21b)
- (5) Wrath limited/deferred for the sake of the divine name (vv. 9, 14, 22)
- (6) Act of limited judgment (vv. 10, 17, 23)<sup>12</sup>

From Israel's beginning and throughout its history, God would have been justified if He had poured out His wrath on the people. They escaped destruction solely because God did not want His holy name to "be profaned in the sight of the nations" (vv. 14, 22).<sup>13</sup>

*for the sake of My name.* That is, "for the sake of the Lord's good reputation." The preciousness of God's name is illustrated by the way He guards it and by the delight He takes when people use His name well. Everything God does for His people reveals Himself and demonstrates His character. It brings glory to His name. Mentioned frequently as the reason for Israel's survival; the honor of God's name is cited also by Isaiah and Jeremiah as motivating Him to restrain His anger (cf. Jer 14:7; Ex 32:11–12; Nu 14:15–16; Dt 9:27–28).<sup>14</sup>

*Sabbaths as a sign.* While the individual's sign of participation in the covenant was circumcision, the sign of Israel's corporate participation in the covenant was the keeping of the Sabbath. Like circumcision, the keeping of the Sabbath was a continuous obligation required of each generation. Unlike circumcision, it was not an individual's one-time act but an attitude to be consistently maintained and periodically expressed in action. Instead of repeating the reasoning of the ten commandments—the Sabbath was to be celebrated as a commemoration of God's creation—the Sabbaths (the plural perhaps signifying all of the sacred holidays of Israel) are here cited to remind the people that they are the chosen. No

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<sup>11</sup> Matthews & Walton, 20:1

<sup>12</sup> Duguid, 260

<sup>13</sup> Engelbrecht, 1341

<sup>14</sup> Engelbrecht, 1341

other people have received this sign, and thus, with the laws, they become both gift and insignia of membership in the covenant community as established in Exodus 31:13.<sup>15</sup>

*statutes and laws that were not good.* The Hebrew terms used here are extremely important to a proper understanding of Ezekiel's controversial statement. This is not a reference to the Law given at Sinai, and the word "Torah" is not used. The word niv translates as "statutes" is the same word that in verse 24 is translated "decrees," except that there it is feminine (as usual) rather than masculine (as here). The word niv translates "laws" is the word for God's judicial decisions. The consequence of Israel's unfaithfulness, then, was that God decreed events that were not in their favor, and he made judicial decisions that threatened their survival. This resulted in God's use of forces that devastated Israel, such as war, famine, plague and foreign armies.

Following Ezekiel's theme of the indisputable power of God to command creation, the decree to sacrifice the firstborn here plays off of the statement in Exodus 13:2 that all firstborns, human and animal, belong to God. This is demonstrated by the tenth plague in Egypt (Ex 13:14–16) but is mitigated or "redeemed" through sacrifice (Ex 34:20) and by the sacrificial act of circumcision (Gen 17:9–14; Ex 22:29). Within Phoenician and Canaanite religion, however, the sacrifice of the firstborn is a common practice (see the comment on "passing children through fire" as part of Molech worship in Deut 18:10). Closer to Ezekiel's time, kings Ahaz and Manasseh are both accused of child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). Since these men as descendants of David and participants in the "everlasting covenant" with Yahweh (2 Sam 23:5) were the guardians of the Law and the enforcers of divine and civil decree, their detestable actions in this regard could easily fit the image of "bad laws" in Ezekiel 20:25.<sup>16</sup>

*a strong hand and with an outstretched arm.* A clear allusion to the exodus story, this phrase is likely a stock image based on Exod 6:6. Later retellings of Israel's history use this phrase as a sort of refrain, succinctly emphasizing the great power Yahweh exhibited during the exodus (see Deut 4:34; 5:15; 2 Kgs 17:36).<sup>17</sup>

*I will make you pass under the rod.* An idiom indicating selection (see Lev 27:32). Those selected will be set apart to accept the obligation of the covenant. Those who are not selected will be punished (see Ezek 20:38).<sup>18</sup>

But what should they expect from the Lord? The answer given in 20:32–44 may surprise us, though it is already implicit in the account Ezekiel has given of Israel's history. God will act, not to destroy his people utterly but rather to fulfill his original purposes in election: to establish a purified people to worship him. He will do this through a new exodus, not because of any merit on Israel's part but for the sake of his own name (20:44).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Matthews & Walton, 20:12

<sup>16</sup> Matthews & Walton, 20:26–27

<sup>17</sup> Barry, et al, 20:33

<sup>18</sup> Barry, et al, 20:37

<sup>19</sup> Duguid, 263