

Ezekiel

Week 13

Yahweh Draws His Sword

Chapters 20:33 - 22

The Lord will Restore Israel (20:33-42)

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).¹

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).²

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).³

The Lord Has Drawn His Sword (21)

This section of Ezekiel's prophecy, all one chapter in the Hebrew versification, divides up into four subsections:

- (1) A parable and its interpretation (20:45–21:7)
- (2) The song of the sword (21:8–17)
- (3) An oracle of judgment against Jerusalem and her prince (21:18–27)
- (4) An oracle of judgment against Ammon and against the sword (21:28–32)

The common theme that binds these sections together is the catchword "sword" as an image of God's judgment, which together with the associated image of fire, falls first on God's people, then on the not-so-innocent bystanders, and finally on the agent of judgment, the Babylonians.⁴

enemy armies as divine punishment. As early as the end of the third millennium, the invasion of armies is interpreted as the intentional actions of a patron deity who has been angered by the behavior of the people (the Gutian invasion that brought an end to the empire of Agade in the *Curse of Agade*). In Mesopotamia this traditional theology is represented also

¹ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eze 20:33). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

² Barry, et al, 20:37

³ Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 263). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁴ Duguid, 274

in Cyrus's rhetoric concerning the overthrow of the Babylonians because of Marduk's displeasure with Nabonidus.⁵

The three Hebrew terms for "south" in the parable (*tēmān*; *dārôm*; *negeb*) are matched by three objects of judgment: Jerusalem, the sanctuary, and the land of Israel (21:2). With that identification in place, other elements of the parable are put into sharper focus. Israel is the southland from the perspective of the traditional "enemy from the north," a motif introduced already in 1:4. The image of fire is linked with that of the sword of the Lord, which is coming against the land to cut off both righteous (the green tree) and wicked (the dry tree), from the south to the north of the land. The sword has been drawn from its scabbard and will not return there.

The focus of the interpretation, like that of the parable, is the all-encompassing nature of the coming judgment. "Righteous" and "wicked," like "green tree" and "dry tree," operate together as a merism, a pair of opposites that includes everything in between. These two are not, however, a randomly chosen pair, which could be replaced by another stock pairing such as "young" and "old." If the judgment includes even the *righteous*, whom one would expect normally to be spared (9:4), then indeed no one will escape. The coming judgment on Jerusalem will not be selective and short-lived, as was the invasion of 597 b.c., but all-encompassing and all-consuming. Nor is there any hope of a reprieve: The fire is kindled; the sword is drawn; there is only the fearful expectation of judgment.

Thus far "the sword" of the Lord has been an entirely figurative image of divine judgment. In 21:18–27, however, we are introduced to the human agency that executes the divine will, the sword of the king of Babylon. The prophet is instructed to perform another sign-act, this time marking out a three-way road junction with a signpost. One way comes from Babylon; the other two go to Rabbah, the capital of the Ammonites, and to Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. Ezekiel is to act out the forces of the king of Babylon coming to this parting of the ways and deciding which route to follow. To which of those two rebellious cities should they go?

The irony is that this use of pagan means of discerning the will of the gods is here an accurate discernment of the will of the true God. The "lying divinations" that had found such favor with God's people (Ezek. 13:7) now become the very means through which judgment comes on them (21:23). Their broken oath to the Lord is punished by the one with whom they have broken a human covenant. In this way, the king of Babylon is acting as divine prosecution counsel (*mazkîr*), bringing out into the open Israel's guilt and arresting them for it.

That punishment falls not only on the people but also upon Zedekiah, rather dismissively addressed as "O profane and wicked prince." By introducing him by that title rather than by name, Ezekiel puts the focus of the judgment on the office, not the person. It is not simply

⁵ Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). [The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament](#) (electronic ed., Eze 21:3). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

that Zedekiah will be stripped of the insignia of royalty, the turban and the crown (21:26), but that in him the old order of things has reached a conclusion. A divine reordering of society is called for, in which the Lord will exalt the lowly and bring down the exalted (21:26; cf. 17:24). His guilt (‘*wōn*) is complete; so, with a fittingness that the Hebrew pun brings out, he will be made completely a “ruin” (‘*awwâ*, repeated three times).

The Sins of Israel Recounted (22)

The idea of comprehensive judgment descending on God’s people was already present in Ezekiel 21, but in chapter 22 it moves into the foreground. In this chapter, the prophet is called on to act as prosecuting counsel, making known to Jerusalem in detail her detestable ways, which form the basis for both the actuality and the immediacy of divine judgment. The comprehensive nature of her sins means that judgment is *necessary* and judgment is *now*.

The prophet begins by presenting his indictment in outline form (22:3–5): Jerusalem’s sins involve both social sins—that is, sins against humanity (e.g., “shedding blood,” 22:3)—and cultic sins—that is, sins against God (e.g., the manufacture of idols, 22:3). These two broad classes of sins have resulted in two respective consequences: social sins lead to “guilt” (‘*āšam*, 22:4), the forensic state of deserving punishment, while cultic sins lead to “defilement” (‘*tāmē*’, 22:4), the ritual state of being unfit to appear in the presence of God. The combination of these in Jerusalem’s case means that she has brought on herself her “doom,” or more literally, “her time” (‘*ittāh*, 22:3); her days have come to a close, and the end of her years have come (v. 4).

Verses 6–12 give the first catalogue of Jerusalem’s crimes, showing how she has offended against God’s law. The charges are directed against the “princes of Israel,” a phrase normally understood as designating the former kings of Judah. Thus in view are not merely present sins but a continuing history of sin on the part of Judah’s leadership. The kings are specifically indicted because it was their responsibility to establish justice in the community, especially by protecting the poor and weak (Ps. 72:1–4).

The sins listed here are not a random collection of charges, but specifically an accusation of having violated the laws of the Pentateuch, especially those of the so-called “Holiness Code” of Leviticus 18–20; 25. Thus in Ezekiel 22:7, the accusation that “they have treated father and mother with contempt” has a basis in Leviticus 20:9, while the claim that they oppressed the alien is based on Leviticus 19:33. The same is true of the remainder of the charges made by the prophet: “despis[ing] my holy things and desecrat[ing] my Sabbaths” (see 19:30), slandering (see 19:16), eating “at the mountain shrines” (see 19:26, lxx),⁴ “commit[ting] lewd acts” (see 20:14), “dishonor[ing] their fathers’ bed” (see 20:11), “violat[ing] women during their period” (see 18:19), “commit[ting] a detestable offense with [one’s] neighbor’s wife” (see 20:10), “defil[ing one’s] daughter-in-law” (see 20:12), “violat[ing one’s] sister” (see 20:17), “tak[ing] usury and excessive interest” (see 25:36), and “mak[ing] unjust gain from your neighbors” (see 19:13).

Because of these things the Lord will now act, dispersing Judah among the nations and scattering them through the countries (22:15). In this way, the Lord will bring an end to Judah's uncleanness (22:15). Though such a fate for the Lord's people would be "defiling" to the Lord in front of the nations, it was a necessary price to pay. As Leslie Allen puts it, the Lord's defilement through Judah's exile "was the lesser of two evils that he was prepared to endure as the price to pay for making his forgetful people remember who and what he was."⁷

The conventional use of the imagery envisages first a scattering of God's people in his wrath and then, after the judgment has had a purifying effect, a gathering of God's people in his mercy. For instance, in 11:17 the Sovereign Lord promises to gather his people from the countries where they have been scattered. Although he frequently uses "gathering" in this conventional, positive sense, Ezekiel has already indicated a possible negative aspect of gathering as a precondition for judgment rather than salvation in 20:34. Here in chapter 22, however, it functions together with its opposite "scattering" to underline the comprehensive nature of the coming judgment.

If the first catalogue of the sins of Jerusalem was detailed with reference to the law (esp. Lev. 18–20; 25), the second catalogue of Jerusalem's sins is detailed with reference to one of the prophets, namely, Zephaniah 3:3–4. Though Zephaniah's four categories of leaders charged with wrongdoing (officials, rulers, prophets, and priests) are expanded to five (princes, priests, officials, prophets, and people of the land), the underlying continuity between the charges is clear: All of the leadership classes in Judah are charged and found guilty of wrongdoing.

After the conclusion of the second catalogue of sins, we again read of the Lord's twofold response. He first of all sought for "a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land" (22:30). In other words, he sought a true prophet (cf. 13:5)—someone who would take on the difficult and dangerous task of interceding for the people, just as Moses did successfully after the incident of the golden calf (Ps. 106:23). But this time no one was found to deflect God's wrath, and thus the all-consuming fiery anger of God will descend on Jerusalem (Ezek. 22:31). As if to emphasize the connection to the destruction of Jerusalem depicted in chapters 9–11, the last, ominous words of the Lord are the same in both cases: "[I will bring] down on their own heads all they have done" (22:31; cf. 11:21).⁶

⁶ Duguid, 274-290