

Ezekiel

Week 16

Judgment of the Nations – Part 2

Chapters 29-32

Oracles Against Egypt

The book of Ezekiel contains a total of seven oracles against Egypt—more than any other country. The question arises as to why a Judaeen prophet resident in Babylonia should be bothered with a country several hundred kilometres away. The answer becomes clear when we look at the history of the period and the chronology of the oracles.

Egypt in Ezekiel's time was a superpower in slow decline. At the height of power her sphere of influence had extended the whole way up the eastern Mediterranean, embracing Palestine and what is now Lebanon and western Syria. When the Babylonians replaced the Assyrians as the dominant force in Middle-Eastern military politics, Egypt allied herself with the Assyrians in order to stop the advance of the Babylonians. The result was a complex power-struggle, and the smaller states in the region—such as Jerusalem/Judah—had to choose their friends carefully.

The chronology of Egypt and Babylonia's interactions up to and during Ezekiel's oracles is as follows:

- 605—The Babylonians defeat the Egyptian forces at Carchemish (*cf.* Je. 46:2) and then press south (Carchemish was in NW Syria). Skirmishing ensues.
- 601—Babylonian and Egyptian forces clash again. There are heavy losses on both sides.
- 597—Nebuchadnezzar subdues Jerusalem. Egypt stays neutral. Zedekiah is placed on the throne as vassal king by Nebuchadnezzar.
- 589—Judah under Zedekiah is in open rebellion against the Babylonians.
- 588 (Jan.)—The Babylonians advance to besiege Jerusalem.
- 588—The siege is lifted temporarily as the Babylonians redirect their efforts against the Egyptian relief forces (Zedekiah had asked the Egyptians for help). However the Egyptians are soon repulsed, and the Babylonians return to besiege the city.
- 587 (Jul.)—Jerusalem's walls are breached. The city and temple are burnt. The state of Judah comes to an end. The country is in ruins.

The Egyptian oracles in Ezekiel are unusual in that all but one of them are dated. Nearly half of the 13 dates given in the book are to be found in the Egyptian section. When arranged in chronological order, the oracles date as follows:

- 587 (Jan.)—29:1-16
- 587 (Apr.)—30:20-26
- 587 (Jun.)—31:1-18
- 586/585—32:17-32
- 585 (Mar.)—32:1-16
- 571 (Apr.)—29:17-21

Like Tyre, Egypt had much national pride. If Tyre was ‘new money’, then Egypt was ‘old money’. Her pride lay in that which she had inherited and seemingly would keep forever. She was a vast country with considerable resources (especially the Nile). She had a marvelous imperial history, a sizeable army, and widespread political influence throughout the Middle East. Yet her confidence in her glorious past was misplaced. Her fate was to be humbled.¹

Egypt: decline and fall (29:1-16)

When we compare the dates of the oracles with the events of the time, we find that the oracles were delivered against a general backdrop of Judah’s oscillation between Egyptian and Babylonian domination. The state of Judah had allied itself, willingly or otherwise, with one or other of those great military powers during the last twenty years before the cataclysmic events of 588–87 bc.

Ezekiel’s series of oracles against Egypt begins during Jerusalem’s darkest hour. Egypt’s maneuvers had failed to break the Babylonian siege. Ezekiel had already predicted the downfall of the city. He now had grim news for her would-be saviour. The overall thrust of his oracles was that Egypt would ultimately fall to the Babylonians and that it would cease to be the great nation it once was.

Jerusalem had already been under siege for a year. There had been a brief respite when the Babylonians were temporarily diverted by an unsuccessful Egyptian assault. Ezekiel’s oracle reflects some of the bitterness that must have been felt in Jerusalem when it became clear that Egypt’s rescue had failed: Egypt was a staff of reed (6); and would no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel (16). Trust placed in military or economic power is always, in the long run, trust misplaced.²

Nebuchadnezzar’s Reward (29:17-21)

The date of this oracle (April 571) makes it the latest of the Egyptian oracles. It links these oracles with those against Tyre. It was inevitable that Nebuchadnezzar would eventually have to invade and attempt to conquer Egypt. The Medes had united the territory east of the Tigris, effectively cutting Babylon off from direct trade with the east, and the Egyptians, with their Phoenician allies, were constantly causing political and commercial problems in the west and along the Arabian trade routes. An extended (thirteen-year according to the fourth-century Greek historian Menander) siege bottled up Tyre and devastated much of Phoenicia (584–571). A fragmentary portion of Nebuchadnezzar’s annals from his thirty-seventh year, Herodotus and Ezekiel 29:19–21 refer to the invasion of Egypt in 568, but no details are given other than victories over desert tribes. It is likely that some Babylonian garrisons were installed in the fortresses of the Sinai following this campaign.³

¹ McGregor, L. J. (1994). *Ezekiel*. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., pp. 735–736). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² McGregor. 737

³ Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 29:19). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

A Dark Day for Egypt (30:1-19)

This oracle is undated, but its theme is similar to the other oracles from 587 bc: Egypt and her allies will fall at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. The first three areas listed (Cush, Put and Lud) are also mentioned in Ezekiel 27:10. Cush (Nubia) was adjacent to Egypt on the south; Put (Lybia) was adjacent to the west. Lydia was to the north across the Mediterranean and was a frequent ally of Egyptians against various enemies to the east. Arabia could refer to the Arabian peninsula to the southeast, but it would be unusual for this Hebrew word to be used that way. It is more frequently used to refer to a mixed assortment of ethnic groups. It is known that the Egyptians during this period used mercenaries from throughout western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. Kub (niv: Libya) is an unknown area probably also within modern Libya. The “land of the covenant” is a reference to soldiers of an unnamed country, probably Judah, which had a military relationship with Egypt at this time and probably supplied mercenaries, as did all of these other lands. Jeremiah is aware of a Jewish settlement in Egypt.⁴

Pharaoh’s Broken Arms (30:20-26)

By the time of this oracle—(April 587)—the inhabitants of Jerusalem would have been besieged by the Babylonians for over a year. Any hopes that Egypt might rescue the city by a second strike against Nebuchadnezzar are finally countered in this oracle. The Egyptians had already been repulsed in 588 (*I have broken the arm of Pharaoh v 21*), and would suffer further defeats (*I will break both his [Pharaoh’s] arms v 22*).

In Scripture the arm is the symbol of aggressive power, and thus the breaking of the arm signifies that the individual in question has been rendered impotent (see Ps 10:15; 37:17). The image of an outstretched or mighty hand or arm is common in Egyptian inscriptions to describe the power of Pharaoh.⁵

The Lesson of the Felled Cedar for Egypt (31:1-18)

The glory of Egypt and the extent of her downfall is illustrated by the allegory of a majestic cedar which was chopped down. The tree used for the metaphor here is the cedar, a well-known ancient Near Eastern symbol of majesty. It was used for the construction of many important palaces and temples. Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian kings all recount how they cut down the cedars of Lebanon in order to construct their mighty edifices.

The power of the Assyrian state waxed and waned for nearly three centuries (c. 900–612 b.c.). At its height its geographic range was enormous, ranging from Iran in the east to central Egypt, central Anatolia and Cyprus in the west. It covered much of the Arabian desert in the south and ranged as far north as modern Armenia. In Ezekiel’s time it had passed off the scene rather recently (about twenty years earlier), so it served as a perfect image of a long-standing superpower that had crumbled to nothing.⁶

⁴ Matthews & Walton. Eze 30:5

⁵ Matthews & Walton. Eze 30:21

⁶ Matthews & Walton. Eze 31:3–14

Lament for Pharaoh (32:1-16)

The monster in this case is not located in the Nile River but “in the seas.” This reference is probably to the cosmic monsters destroyed by God (see Is 51:9–10; Ps 74:13). In the Bible as well as in the ancient Near East, the sea represents chaos and disorder, as do the sea monsters that live there. The obvious physical struggle between the sea and the land as well as the fierce, seemingly unstoppable energy displayed by the savage sea gave rise to cosmic myths in the ancient Near East.

In Psalm 104:26, Yahweh is said to play with Leviathan, and in Job 41:1–11, God challenges Job to show his control over Leviathan as God does. The kingdoms represented by these beasts are therefore associated with the forces of chaos that bring disorder to God’s world and need to be overcome (see comments on Dan 7).⁷

Egypt’s descent to the domain of death (32:17-32)

This lament expands on two themes which had already been mentioned in the oracles: (1) Egypt will lie in its death alongside other nations ‘killed’ in battle, and (2) she will share her fate with the uncircumcised. (*cf.* 31:18).

Ezekiel uses poetic imagery in his description of Egypt in her state of death. She is depicted as lying in a land surrounded by the war-graves of other deceased nations. The imagery is not to be seen as a description of the after-life in theological terms. It was a useful way of conveying the degradation of Egypt’s condition.⁸

The nations listed in 22–30 all suffered significant devastation. Ezekiel probably has in mind the final defeat and destruction of the Assyrian empire at the end of the sixth century b.c. Her armies were probably finally destroyed at the battle of Carchemish, where Egypt (and probably Assyria) was decisively defeated by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Thus, the imagery sees that the final end of Assyria is in Sheol, the abode of the dead.⁹

Conclusion

What are we to make of these judgments against the nations and what significance may they hold for us today? First, they unquestionably affirm the sovereignty of Yahweh as God in the midst of the ebb and flow of international affairs. Secondly, they equally clearly portray the transience of all human power and glory, whether political, military or economic. And thirdly, they repeatedly affirm that the goal of all God’s action is that the nations will know him, Yahweh, to be God. Ezekiel would have endorsed Habakkuk’s famous vision that ‘the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’.¹⁰

⁷ Matthews & Walton. Eze 32:2

⁸ McGregor. 737

⁹ Matthews & Walton. Eze 32:21–22

¹⁰ Wright, C. J. H. (2001). *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*. (A. Motyer & D. Tidball, Eds.) (p. 255). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.