

# Ezekiel

## Week 5

### *The Day Has Come*

### *Chapters 6-7*

#### **Judgment for Idolatry (6)**

Like the ever-widening circle of ripples that come from dropping a stone into still water, Ezekiel 6 builds on the previous judgment oracle and expands it. Whereas before the prophet addressed the city of Jerusalem, the political and religious center of the land, now he is told to set his face against the mountains of all Israel. The geographical boundaries of judgment have been widened.

The chapter divides into two parts, verses 2–10 and 11–14, each of which begins with a hostile gesture on the part of the prophet (“set your face,” v. 2; “strike your hands together and stamp your feet,” v. 11) and concludes with the recognition formula (“they will know that I am the Lord”). The Lord’s wrath has been aroused and he will not be ignored.<sup>1</sup>

*the mountains of Israel.* Phrase Ezekiel uses 16 times; used by no other prophet. Several factors are involved: (1) nostalgia for the hilly land of Israel is held in contrast to relatively flat terrain of lower Mesopotamia; (2) Ezekiel expands his scope from besieged Jerusalem (chs 3–5) to the whole land of Israel; and (3) the mountains were often centers of pagan worship (see p 526). A sequel comes in ch 36, describing Israel’s return to the mountains of Israel in a faithful age.<sup>2</sup>

Before King David established Jerusalem as the capital and before God’s ark was placed in the temple, worship of the true God at other locations had been allowed (1 Samuel 9:14; 1 Kings 3:4). After King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, worship at other locations was discouraged, because it led to a blurring of the distinction between the worship of the true God and the worship of regional gods. It also led to local corruptions of the true worship. After the northern ten tribes split from the Southern Kingdom, worship centers in the border cities of Dan and Bethel became competition for the worship at Jerusalem. This was repugnant to God, for it led people away from worshipping him.<sup>3</sup>

The high place (Hebrew: *bamah*) is a place of worship where an altar is functioning. It is typically not an open-air shrine but an indoor facility, housing sacred furniture and precincts large enough to accommodate a priesthood (we cannot assume that all of them were on high ground).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 106). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1317). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>3</sup> Kuschel, K. B. (1986). *Ezekiel* (pp. 38–39). Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House.

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., 1 Sa 9:12). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

These local high places became the entry points for Canaanite religious ideas and images, whether the figures of Baal and Asherah or the practices that went along with Canaanite fertility religions. For that reason, the repeated failure of the reigning monarch to suppress the high places in both the northern and southern kingdoms is a major concern in the book of Kings; only Hezekiah and Josiah attempted to destroy them. Syncretism was at some times actually officially encouraged, while at other times the authorities simply turned a blind eye to it.<sup>5</sup>

*bones scattered around altars.* There are three significances that combine to give this action meaning. The first concerns the exposure of the corpses of the dead. For the importance of proper burial, see the comments on Joshua 8:29 and 1 Kings 16:4. The second concerns desecration of the holy sites. In Israelite thinking, contact with the dead rendered someone or something unclean. Sacred sites could therefore be permanently contaminated if they were made repositories for that which was unclean (see comment on 2 Kings 10:27). The third significance concerns assigning responsibility for the fate of the Israelites who have perished. Their death is on the heads of these idols and altars that did nothing to save them.<sup>6</sup>

Once more, as in Ezekiel 5, an echo of Leviticus 26 is unmistakable, as the covenant curses fall on the rebellious people. Leviticus 26:30 threatens: “I will destroy your high places [*bāmōtêkem*], cut down your incense altars [*ḥammānêkem*] and pile your dead bodies [*pigrêkem*] on the lifeless forms of your idols [*gillûlêkem*].” Similarly in Ezekiel 6:3–5 the Lord says: “I will destroy your high places [*bāmōtêkem*] ... and your incense altars [*ḥammānêkem*] ... I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites [*pigrê bēnê yiśrā’ēl*] in front of their idols [*gillûlêhem*].”<sup>7</sup>

When God acts decisively in this way, the result will be that Israel “will know that I am the Lord” (Ezek. 6:7). This so-called “recognition formula” is characteristic of Ezekiel and occurs no fewer than four times in this chapter (6:7, 10, 13, 14). It stresses the fact that the knowledge of the Lord comes about not through self-examination and navel-gazing but rather as a direct result of God’s actions in history.<sup>8</sup>

The threefold judgment of sword, famine, and plague is once again unleashed on the land (v. 11). This fearsome trio is familiar from Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 5, and they are three of the four “horsemen of the Apocalypse” in Revelation 6.<sup>9</sup>

Ezekiel is instructed by God to perform a series of symbolic gestures (clapping, stomping his foot and uttering an exclamation) that display God’s wrath. Stomping one’s foot is often a sign of frustration, anger, or derision.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Duguid. 107

<sup>6</sup> Matthews & Walton. Eze 6:5

<sup>7</sup> Duguid. 107-08

<sup>8</sup> Duguid. 108

<sup>9</sup> Duguid. 109

<sup>10</sup> Matthews & Walton. Eze 6:11

*wilderness to Riblah.* The geographic range here, like the more familiar “from Dan to Beersheba,” expresses God’s ability to punish the Israelites from one end to the other of their territory. The desert refers to the wilderness around Beersheba. Diblah appears in the Septuagint and is a variant of Riblah, which was in the land of Syro-Hamath just south of Kadesh (2 Kings 23:33). Its mention here may refer to the city’s use by Nebuchadnezzar. It was the headquarters for his army’s campaign during his siege of Jerusalem in 588–586 b.c.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Day of the Lord (7)**

There is a twofold expansion in Ezekiel 7 in the scope of the judgment from that described in his previous messages.

(1) It is once more expanded geographically. Just as Ezekiel began with the city of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 5 and moved on to the heartland of Judah, the mountains of Israel, in Ezekiel 6, so now he widens his scope of attention to include judgment on the whole “land of Israel” (7:2). Indeed, judgment has come upon the “four corners of the land [world].” The global language may be applied to a judgment that affects “only” Judah since, as Greenberg puts it, “from the prophet’s viewpoint, the doom of his people is tantamount to the end of the world.”

(2) Ezekiel insists repeatedly that doom is not merely imminent but has actually arrived. Whereas the previous oracle spoke of a certain judgment to come at an unspecified time in the future, here we see a certain judgment now present. Thus verses 3 and 8 in Hebrew both start with the word “now,” while verse 7 announces (lit.): “The time has come, the day has arrived.” Further, in this chapter for the first time there is not even a glimmer of the light at the end of the tunnel, no mention of a possible remnant. The focus is entirely on the darkness of the descending gloom that is now falling over the land.<sup>12</sup>

The language that Ezekiel adopts is influenced heavily by the traditional language of the Day of the Lord. This “Day” was frequently longed for during times of difficulty as the day when the Lord would come to judge the nations; however, the prophets had pointed out that it was also the time when God would judge his own people Israel (cf. Amos 5:18–20). The outcome of that Day of Judgment was likely to be far from positive. Thus Amos was shown a vision of ripe summer fruit (*qāyīš*, Amos 8:1), a vision that leads into an oracle of Israel’s end (*qēš*, 8:2). Likewise, in Genesis 6:13, God had told Noah that he was about to bring an end (*qēš*) to all people, and the result was the Flood. So here, when Ezekiel speaks repeatedly of the coming of an end (*qēš*) on the people, what Judah is being threatened with is nothing less than complete and immediate annihilation. What Amos had foreseen concerning the northern kingdom is now happening in parallel fashion to the southern kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Matthews & Walton. Eze 6:14

<sup>12</sup> Duguid. 118

<sup>13</sup> Duguid. 118

Ezekiel 7 opens with a brief oracle that summarizes the themes of the chapter (vv. 1–4). The prophesied end is coming on the whole land of Israel (v. 2), and it is coming now (v. 3). That devastating event is nothing less than the personal “sending” (*šālah*) of the Lord’s anger against them, just as earlier he had threatened to “send” his arrows of famine against them (5:16). But the Lord’s action in destroying them is neither arbitrary nor unfair; it is simply judging them according to their conduct and repaying them for all their detestable practices. Measure for measure, they will receive what they deserve for their abominations (7:3), without favoritism or pity, resulting in an understanding of the Lord’s power and holiness.<sup>14</sup>

The second oracle (7:5–9) picks up from the first oracle the theme of the personal nature of divine judgment on the people’s sin. All of the first person verbs from the first oracle expressing the outpouring of the Lord’s wrath recur, along with a significantly modified version of the recognition formula, “Then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes the blow” (7:9). No longer does the Lord reveal himself to his people as “the Lord, who heals you,” as he did during the wanderings in the desert (Ex. 15:26); rather, he has now become “the Lord who strikes.”

The third oracle (Ezek. 7:10–27) unfolds the theme of the comprehensiveness of judgment from the first oracle. It begins with a brief introduction (vv. 10–11), which draws out the organic connection between Judah’s sin and her punishment. This was already prepared for by the agricultural background of the language of the “end” (*qēṣ*); the “end” is the time for harvesting ripe fruit. Now the sin of Judah has reached full ripeness and it is time for the harvest of God’s judgment. According to verses 10–11, Israel’s “doom[?]” has burst forth, the rod has budded, arrogance has blossomed! Violence has grown into a rod to punish wickedness.” Alongside Israel’s blossoming pride and violence, however, the rod of God’s judgment has been growing, namely, Babylon. It will mete out punishment corresponding to the crime until there is nothing left. The people who filled the city with violence (7:23) will themselves be attacked by violent men (7:22; niv “robbers”); the wicked will be turned over to “the wicked of the earth” (7:21); the arrogant will be humbled (7:24).<sup>15</sup>

*seller will not recover land.* The extent of the doom pronounced upon the nation is such that even the Jubilee year will not be celebrated (see the comment on Lev 25:8–55). Ordinarily, property that had been sold to satisfy debts could be redeemed during the Jubilee, thereby restoring the grants of lands that were first made after the conquest (the Code of Hammurabi contain similar clauses regarding redemption of land). Now the “divine lease” has been revoked, and there will be no economic advantage for buyer or seller in the age of destruction to come.<sup>16</sup>

Even gold and silver will be worthless, able neither to save their owners nor to satisfy them (7:19). Indeed, these precious metals will be worse than worthless; they will not simply be regarded as trash, to be carelessly disposed of, but as something ritually unclean,

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<sup>14</sup> Duguid. 118-19

<sup>15</sup> Duguid. 119

<sup>16</sup> Matthews & Walton. Eze 7:13

contaminated in itself and with the power to contaminate anyone whom it touches (7:19). The reason for that loathing is because gold and silver furnished the materials for the people's idolatry (7:20), "for it has made them stumble into sin" (v. 19); it was the iniquity that caused their downfall.

The nature of the disaster is the focus of the next section in the cycle: Though preparations are made for war, no battle will be joined, for God's wrath is on all her masses (*h<sup>a</sup>mônāh*, Ezek. 7:14; niv "crowd").<sup>6</sup> Judah will be given over into the hand of her enemies, and all her possessions will be handed over as plunder (7:22). This is a reversal of the normal themes of holy war, whereby no battle would be necessary for the Israelites because the Lord would fight on their behalf, giving their enemies into their hand as plunder (cf. 2 Chron. 20). Now, however, the Lord will turn away his face (Ezek. 7:22), allowing the wicked of the earth to pollute the land and even to desecrate "my treasured place" (*šepûnî*; v. 22).<sup>17</sup>

*Forge a chain!* To bind the captive Israelites together into a long train to be led into captivity.<sup>18</sup>

That change of attitude toward Judah meant that even the temple, where David had earlier expressed confidence that God would hide him (*šāpan*; Ps. 27:5), is no longer a safe place. It would be defiled along with their other (pagan) sanctuaries (Ezek. 7:24). Since Israel failed to distinguish between true and false places of worship and did not destroy the high places, now God's judgment will be similarly nondiscriminatory, destroying not only the pagan sanctuaries but his own temple.

In the face of this disaster, no coherent policy will be formulated or implemented. All hands will hang passively by their sides. Paralyzing fear will result in loss of control of bodily functions (Ezek. 7:17). The people will put on a show of mourning by means of their clothes and their shaven heads (7:18), yet no mercy or forgiveness will be found there, as God already announced (7:4). The people will seek peace and not find it (7:25), whether they seek it through the channel of religious leadership or political leadership. There will be no effective guidance through the religious leadership, whether the prophet (from whom a vision might be sought), the priest (from whom Torah, or instruction from the priestly law, might be sought), or the elders (from whom wisdom and counsel might be expected). Nor will there be effective leadership in the political realm. Not a "king" or a "prince" or any of the "people of the land" will act decisively to save the day (7:27). Rather, they too will be judged "by their own standards."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Duguid. 120

<sup>18</sup> Engelbrecht. 1319

<sup>19</sup> Duguid. 121