

# Ezekiel

## Week 8

### *Captivity Symbolized and False Prophets Condemned*

### *Chapters 12-13*

#### **Action Parable: Judah's Captivity (Chapter 12)**

This section is made up of a sign-act of exile (12:3–7), the interpretation of this sign-act (12:8–17), and a second sign-act of fear and trembling (12:18–20). The dominant motif throughout is of looking and not seeing. Repeatedly, Ezekiel is instructed to carry out his actions “as they watch” (*l'ênêhem*, seven times in 12:3–7). His actions are not particularly obscure, depicting as they do an event in which the exiles had all personally taken part. Yet the result of his actions, noted by the Lord in verse 8, is not dawning comprehension on the part of the exiles but inability to understand.

What is more, even when he delivers the word of the Lord to them, explaining in oracular form what the sign-act means, the people's response is that recorded in 12:27: “The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future.” Though they hear every word he speaks, it is clear that they have understood nothing at all. Indeed, they are a rebellious people, who have ears and do not hear, eyes and do not see.<sup>1</sup>

*the baggage of an exile.* Assyrian reliefs depict prisoners being deported and carrying large bags on their shoulders. The Talmud claimed that the baggage consisted of a sleeping mat, a lamp, and a bowl. Ezekiel was part of the first group of exiles, along with King Jehoiachin, in 597 bc (see note on Ezek 1:2).<sup>2</sup>

These preparations are to be made in the daytime, though the departure is delayed until evening. This delay serves both the practical purpose of allowing time for a crowd to gather to witness the sign-act and a symbolic purpose, representing God's delaying of judgment until the proper time, the gathering gloom of evening (12:4).<sup>3</sup>

*digging through the wall.* As depicted in Assyrian reliefs, a number of different measures were used to breach the defenses of a city under siege. Among these was undermining or drilling through the city walls. Ezekiel, since he was digging from the outside of his wall inward, therefore took on the role of the Babylonians, who were working, at God's command, to break through into the city.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the details of the sign-act are capable of more than one interpretation. Does the breaking through the wall symbolize something Zedekiah does in his attempt to escape or

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<sup>1</sup> Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 161). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eze 12:3). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

<sup>3</sup> Duguid. 161

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 12:5). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

the breaches made by the Babylonians through which they bring out their prisoner? Does the covering of his face represent an attempt at concealment, or shame and grief? Though the imagery is complex, the essential message seems reasonably straightforward. Not only will there be a further exile, bringing out those still remaining in Jerusalem and Judah, but this anti-exodus will center on the person of the prince, Zedekiah.<sup>5</sup>

*prince in Jerusalem.* At the time Ezekiel was speaking, Zedekiah was the ruler of Jerusalem. He was the third son of Josiah to sit on the throne, although his power to rule was strictly curtailed and under the supervision of Nebuchadnezzar (see 2 Kings 24:15–17). The fact that Ezekiel refers to Zedekiah as “prince” (Hebrew *nasi*) instead of as king (Hebrew *melek*) is an indication that he does not consider him the true successor of David.<sup>6</sup>

*My net ... My snare.* Metaphors to emphasize God’s control over the capture of the prince, in spite of his attempts to escape.<sup>7</sup>

*will not see it, there he will die.* This statement was fulfilled in the blinding of King Zedekiah after the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar’s troops. Although he would be taken into the exile and would spend the rest of his life a prisoner, Zedekiah’s eyes were destroyed after he was forced to witness the execution of his children (see 2 Kings 25:7). The practice of gouging out a prisoner’s eyes appears in the Assyrian Annals of Ashurnasirpal II in the ninth century and those of Sargon II in the eighth century. This was simply one of several terror tactics employed to frighten and humiliate their enemies.<sup>8</sup>

*every vision has come to nothing.* The people have become complacent in light of repeated prophecies of judgment that have not been fulfilled. Ezekiel disputes popular proverbial sayings here and in 18:2. He presents the proverb, then explains how the conventional wisdom it expresses is wrong.<sup>9</sup>

*flattering divinations.* The task of the diviner was to determine the will of a god or gods through various ritualized actions—the examination of sheep entrails, consultation with the dead (1 Sam 28:8) or the study of the astrological configurations. All of these practices were forbidden by Israelite law (see the comment on Deut 18:10–13) because of their association with false gods and false religions. Naturally, a diviner would wish to please his paying clients and thus might be inclined to flatter or seduce them with his manner and statements (compare Prov 26:24–26). Such desirable predictions were out of place and to be considered similar to those condemned by Jeremiah (see Jer 27:9–10).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Duguid. 162

<sup>6</sup> Matthews & Walton. 12:10

<sup>7</sup> Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1327). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>8</sup> Matthews & Walton. 12:13

<sup>9</sup> Barry, et al. 12:22

<sup>10</sup> Matthews & Walton. 12:24

*I, Yahweh, I will speak.* Yahweh has tired of false prophets claiming to speak on His behalf and expecting their false visions to be fulfilled. Ezekiel 13 expands on the problem of false prophecy and what will happen to the false prophets.<sup>11</sup>

The Lord's commitment to fulfill *whatever he has spoken* (12:25, 28) brings us to the crux of the issue between the true and the false prophets—the source of their words. Not every word spoken by someone claiming to be a prophet would be fulfilled, for not all spoke the word of the Lord. In order for every prophetic word to be fulfilled, it was necessary that judgment should come to silence the self-proclaimed prophets. This idea, mentioned in passing in 12:24, is unfolded throughout chapter 13 in two halves that show considerable symmetry.<sup>12</sup>

### **False Prophets Condemned (Chapter 13)**

Following the condemnation of false visions in 12:21–28, Ezekiel receives an oracle directed at false prophets. The oracle addresses male prophets who lie about having received a divine word and female prophets who engage in obscure magical practices.<sup>13</sup>

In 13:3 Ezekiel calls these people “foolish prophets [a pun on the similar sounding words *nēbî'îm*, prophets, and *nēbālîm*, fools] who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing.” They confidently proclaim the divine origin of their words, saying, “Hear the word of the Lord” (13:2), and using the oracle formula, “The Lord declares” (13:6–7). They even hope to see what they have prophesied established (13:6), though in actuality they have no calling from Yahweh (13:7).<sup>14</sup>

The woe oracle is a common genre in prophetic literature (e.g., Isa 5:8; Mic 2:1). *Hoy* occurs some 50 times in the ot. The pronouncement of woe accompanies an accusation or a description of the condemned behavior and is followed by a declaration of judgment. Here, the accusation is in Ezek 13:3–7, and the judgment is pronounced in vv. 8–9. This prophetic style also appears in the nt, most notably in the sayings of Jesus (see Luke 10:13; Matt 18:7). The Gospels of Matthew and Luke contain the majority of nt woe oracles.<sup>15</sup>

*breaches.* Place in the city walls that attackers had weakened or opened. If defenders did not assemble there, the enemy would soon come pouring in. They could repair the breach by patching it or building a new wall.<sup>16</sup>

*false visions and lying divinations.* Parallel terms; “divinations” nearly always implies some pagan procedure that is supposed to reveal God's will.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Barry, et al. 12:25

<sup>12</sup> Duguid. 171

<sup>13</sup> Barry, et al. 13:1-23

<sup>14</sup> Duguid. 172

<sup>15</sup> Barry, et al. 13:3

<sup>16</sup> Engelbrecht. 1328

<sup>17</sup> Engelbrecht. 1328

The concern of the passage is not so much the fate of those who trust in the whitewashed wall, but that of those who have whitewashed it, that is, the false prophets. The divine hand will be raised in judgment on them, and it is decreed that “they will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel” (Ezek. 13:9). (1) To be excluded from “the council of my people” (*sôd ‘ammî*) was to be cut off from their place in the assembly of the righteous, the true Israel. It is surely a fitting fate that those who have falsely claimed to be prophets, and thus to have access to the council of the Lord (*sôd yhw̄h*), will ultimately be excluded even from the council of his people. (2) Further, their names will not “be listed in the records of the house of Israel” (13:9). To be left off the records of the people means being excluded from full participation in the community. The importance of such a list may be seen from Nehemiah 7, where the finding of a register listing those who first returned from exile became the basis on which certain families were excluded from the priesthood (Neh. 7:63–64 = Ezra 2:62–63). (3) They will not “enter the land of Israel” (13:9). When Israel returns from exile, the false prophets will not participate in that return. Like rebellious Israel in the desert, they will not [re-]enter the Promised Land.<sup>18</sup>

The declaration that peace and prosperity were on the way (see Jer 6:14) was a false but popular message at the time. The dislike of a prophet such as Jeremiah (who is arrested for preaching doom and destruction) reflects that he was not telling the people what they wanted to hear. The true prophet preaches the message without regard for whether it will be popular or well-received.<sup>19</sup>

*smear it with whitewash.* Annual maintenance for preserving a mud brick building. The false prophets cover over their fallacies with a thin veneer, which conceals the wall’s fatal cracks.<sup>20</sup>

*bands.* The Hebrew word used here, *keseth*, is likely related to an Akkadian term for magic that used bindings. Babylonian incantations involved magical knots and bonds.

*veils.* The rare Hebrew word used here, *mispachah*, is used instead of the normal word for veil, suggesting a special type of head-covering used in magical rituals.

*ensnare people’s lives.* The Hebrew phrase used here likely refers to necromancy, the practice of attempting to communicate with the dead (see Isa 8:19 and note).<sup>21</sup>

Out of concern for the people of Israel, referred to as “my people” five times in this chapter (Ezek. 13:9, 10, 19, 21, 23), the Lord will act to break the power of the prophesying women over the people, destroying their equipment so that the people will no longer be their victims (13:20–21).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Duguid. 173-174

<sup>19</sup> Barry, et al. 13:10

<sup>20</sup> Engelbrecht. 1328

<sup>21</sup> Barry, et al. 13:18

<sup>22</sup> Duguid. 175