

Ezekiel

Week 9

Idolaters and Jerusalem Condemned

Chapters 14-15

Idolatrous Elders Condemned (14:1-11)

The elders served as the authorities for the exiles. They came to Ezekiel as supplicants seeking counsel and an oracle. The gesture of sitting before him (at his feet) indicates his role as teacher and spokesperson for God. There is some question whether they sincerely accepted his authority or were simply curious about what he could offer as a word of God.¹

Ezekiel had by now received accreditation through the fulfillment of his earlier oracles, and it was with not unreasonable expectation of a positive word for the future that the elders came. However, they were to be disappointed. There was no automatic word of salvation for them. The era of promise was not to dawn as an inalienable right of all members of God's people.²

The Hebrew word for idols used here, *gillulim*, appears only in the plural in the OT and always in reference to idols. The biblical use is intentionally insulting and disparaging because *gillulim* is based on the word *gel*, meaning "dung" (see 4:12; Job 20:7).

The whole phrase, *gilluleihem al-libbam*, can be taken literally or metaphorically. The elders might be literally guilty by wearing some sort of magical amulet around their necks, or they may simply be guilty of devotion to other gods. Wearing protective amulets was a common practice among the Babylonians. They wore amulets to protect against demons, ensure a safe pregnancy and birth, facilitate romantic attraction, or protect themselves from destruction and disease.³

The elders in exile are tainted with the same fundamental sin as those left behind in Judah: internal idolatry. Even while externally willing to go through the orthodox motions of inquiring of the Lord, their hearts belonged elsewhere. The phrase "wicked stumbling block," [stumbling block of his iniquity] which occurs six times in Ezekiel, is also invariably linked to idolatry. Because the hearts of the exilic elders are divided between the Lord and idols, the Lord will give the elders no answer to their inquiry except an answer of judgment (14:4). By this means, the Lord will "seize" their hearts, arresting them for their sin (14:5). Seeking to serve two masters will result in judgment by the Lord, the only "master" with any real power to act.

¹ Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 14:1–3). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² Allen, L. C. (1998). *Ezekiel 1–19* (Vol. 28, p. 205). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

³ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eze 14:3). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

The people in exile are equally implicated in this halfheartedness. The result is that all of the exiles have, in their hearts, deserted the Lord for their idols (14:5). Such people—whether native-born Israelite or proselyte (14:7)—should not expect to receive a word of divine guidance through the prophet. God is not deceived by the orthodoxy of their outward behavior, for he looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Instead, the Lord will answer them himself (Ezek. 14:7), by direct action rather than through a prophet. Do they want a word from the Lord? The Lord will demonstrate his attitude toward them by making them “an example and a byword” (14:8). Just as Lot’s wife has become a proverbial example of the dangers of looking back, so they too will become a “byword,” a proverbial warning of the dangers of divided loyalties.⁴

sign. Visible warning or lesson.

byword. Proverbial representative of all who would presume upon God’s grace.⁵

The judgment with which they are threatened is being “cut ... off from [the Lord’s] people” (14:8). This punishment has often been interpreted as a form of excommunication; however, in view of the divine destruction threatened on a prophet in the following verse, the death penalty is more likely indicated here.⁶ In any case, it is doubtful that the people would have seen a big distinction between the two fates as we do. In either case, the sinner would be excised from the covenant community, from the realm of life, and sent out into the realm of death, like the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement.

A similar judgment would apply to any prophet who attempted to provide an oracle for them. There were clearly other prophets present in exile apart from Ezekiel, and the temptation to go shopping around for a more favorable word was significant. Yet any such word would be no true word from the Lord, but rather a deceiving word sent as a judgment on the compromising prophet and people alike (14:9). Those who sought false gods rather than the true God would find what they sought—lies in place of the truth. Those who attempted to counteract God’s will by speaking when he had not spoken would find that they were doing nothing other than God’s will, confirming the guilty ones in their guilt.

Yet the goal of God’s judgment on the exiles is not their total extermination, but rather their salvation. There is still room for God’s people to repent and return to God (14:6). The result of God’s purifying judgment will be a faithful and undefiled people, cleansed from their transgressions (14:11). The goal of the covenant—God’s dwelling in the midst of his people—will certainly not be thwarted, not even by Israel’s sin (14:11).⁶

Jerusalem Will Not Be Spared (14:12-23)

This passage returns to imagery of punishment by sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts from chs. 5–7 (especially see 5:17; 6:11; 7:15). The sayings are structured as case law (if X, then Y), which is prominent in Lev 17–26 (see Lev 17:10; 20:6, 10 for examples).

⁴ Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 184). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁵ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1330). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

⁶ Duguid. 185

The underlying theological issue is whether the righteousness of a few can delay the judgment of many. Ezekiel's answer is "no," while in Genesis God answered "maybe" to Abraham's intercession for Sodom (see Gen 18:23–33). In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18–19), the minimum number of righteous people was not met, so judgment moved forward as planned. Ezekiel focuses on the quality of the righteous, not the number. He presents three well-known characters—Noah, Daniel, and Job—as exemplars of righteousness and asserts that even their presence could not save Jerusalem from the coming judgment.⁷

No one else's righteousness can be transferred to that land's account and save it. Each person must personally believe and answer to God. *Noah, Daniel, and Job*. Three paragons of righteousness. Noah lived in ancient times (during the flood). Job is not dated precisely in the Bible, but likely belongs to patriarchal times (see p 781). Daniel was Ezekiel's close contemporary (see p 1394). Jer 15:1–3 speaks similarly, using Moses and Samuel as examples. *their righteousness*. Would deliver only themselves. Transfer of merit is not possible. Cf 1Pt 3:19–20; 2Pt 2:5; see p 843. Cypr: "Who was more righteous than Noah, who, when the earth was filled with sins, was alone found righteous on the earth? Who more glorious than Daniel? Who more strong for suffering martyrdom in firmness of faith, more happy in God's condescension, who so many times, both when he was in conflict conquered, and, when he had conquered, lived on? Was any more ready in good works than Job, braver in temptations, more patient in sufferings, more submissive in his fear, more true in his faith?" (*ANF* 5:442).⁸

The point in each case is that even three such outstanding citizens would be unable to rescue their closest relatives (sons and daughters) out of the divinely decreed disaster for covenant violation (14:14, 16, 18, 20); their righteousness would suffice merely to save themselves. Here, there is reference to the principle of covenant or corporate solidarity, whereby a family unit often stands or falls together. It may well be that again the apparently universal language serves to deal with a specific situation, for many of those in exile would have left their children behind them and would naturally be concerned for their fate.⁶ The source of their hope would be that, as Abraham noted, God would not surely destroy the righteous along with the wicked (Gen. 18:23).

That basic theological statement is not contested in the hypothetical situation of Ezekiel 14; the righteous would themselves escape the judgment. What is contested, however, is the presumption that the presence of men of sufficient righteousness would save a land under the just judgment of God. If even such men could only save themselves and not their closest relatives, then what hope was there for the families of ordinary people? A similar declaration of the hopelessness of Jerusalem's situation is found in Jeremiah 15. There the Lord declares that he would not heed the intercession of even such famous prophets as Moses and Samuel. The people's fate is decided. It is too late for any change of heart to occur, and it would be useless for Jeremiah to attempt to avert it.⁹

⁷ Barry, et al. 14:12–23

⁸ Engelbrecht. 1330

⁹ Duguid. 194–195

A remnant will be left over. The preservation of a remnant brought out of large-scale judgment is a prominent biblical theme.¹⁰

They will console you. Children will encourage their parents, as both groups will see that they had been guilty of the same depraved ways and deeds. God was just in destroying Jerusalem and leading a few into captivity. *not done without cause.* They will realize that the Lord had acted appropriately, not in some fit of temper.¹¹

Jerusalem, A Useless Vine (15)

Ezekiel 15 is a brief parable, a pictorial story with a sting in the tail; the interpretation of the parable that the prophet adds develops the message of chapter 14 concerning the inevitability of Jerusalem's destruction. The link with the preceding section is apparent in the concluding verse (15:8), which picks up the idea of a land acting unfaithfully (*mā'al ma'al*; 14:13), that is, breaching the covenant relationship, and consequently becoming desolate (*šēmāmâ*; 14:16). This acts as a kind of *inclusio*, rounding off this section (14:12–15:8) with its focus on Jerusalem's forthcoming annihilation.

The prunings cut from the vine were familiar objects, and it is immediately apparent to all that they serve no useful purpose. They cannot be manufactured into anything of value, not even a peg to hang something on—the most basic of all uses. They have neither strength nor beauty to commend them. The only thing therefore to do with these agricultural by-products is to burn them.¹²

If the vine was nearly useless to begin with, it will be totally useless after being reduced to ashes or a half-burned stick. Aph: "Its two branches are the two kingdoms, and its inward part which is laid waste is Jerusalem" (*NPNF 2 13:360*).¹³

But even this first "burning," the initial defeat of Judah in 597 b.c. and the first exile, has not achieved a redemptive purpose: The people have not been made any more fit for God's purposes, but on the contrary even more useless than before. Again, the conclusion is inescapable: "Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them" (15:7). Back into the fire they will go, for they are fit for nothing else, and this time the destruction will be complete. As in 14:12–23, the unfaithfulness of the land to its covenant overlord in pursuing idols will result in its being made desolate.¹⁴

¹⁰ Barry, et al. 14:22).

¹¹ Engelbrecht. 1331

¹² Duguid. 200

¹³ Engelbrecht. 1331

¹⁴ Duguid. 200-201