

Ezekiel 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ezekiel chapter 6. And I will cast down your slain before your idols, and I will lay the dead bodies of the people of Israel before their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars.

Wherever you dwell, the city shall be waste, and the high places ruined, so that your altars will be waste and ruined, your idols broken and destroyed, your incense altars cut down, and your works wiped out.

And the slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the Lord. Yet I will leave some of you alive, when you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries.

Then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me, and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols.

And they will be loathsome in their own sight for the evils that they have committed, for all their abominations. And they shall know that I am the Lord. I have not said in vain that I would do this evil to them.

[1 : 32] Thus says the Lord God, clap your hands and stamp your foot, and say, Alas, because of all the evil abominations of the house of Israel. For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.

He who is far off shall die of pestilence, and he who is near shall fall by the sword. And he who is left and is preserved shall die of famine. Thus I will spend my fury upon them.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain lie among their idols, around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols.

And I will stretch out my hand against them, and make the land desolate and waste, in all their dwelling places, from the wilderness to Ribbler. Then they will know that I am the Lord.

In Ezekiel chapter 4 and 5, Ezekiel had performed a sign against the city of Jerusalem. Ezekiel chapter 6 begins a new oracle, introduced with the formula, The word of the Lord came to me.

[2 : 35] Besides the wickedness of the kings of Judah, and the abominations committed at the temple in Jerusalem, the key sites of the people's idolatry were the various shrines scattered throughout the land, especially on the mountains and by sacred trees.

As in the preceding chapters, the curses of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 continue to be very much in the background here. The ministry of the prophets rested upon the covenant that the Lord had formed with his people at Sinai.

The prophets prosecuted the terms of the covenant against rebellious people in the name of the Lord. Ezekiel is instructed to set his face against the mountains of Israel, much as he had formerly done against the city of Jerusalem.

The land of Israel has the Jordan Rift Valley running through it, with the river Jordan and the Dead Sea in the middle, with a ridge of mountains on both sides like the backbone of the land.

Ezekiel addresses these mountains in particular, but also the hills, the ravines and the valleys. The mountains are especially emphasised as they were the primary sites of idolatrous worship.

[3 : 37] The general address to the mountains implies, as Daniel Block notes, the extensive and pervasive character of the idolatry for which the people are being judged. It wasn't merely a couple of hills and mountains, but in every part of the land.

You can imagine the effect that this might have had upon the exiles. They might have looked back longingly upon the land from which they were taken, and to the city of Jerusalem that they left behind. However, in Ezekiel's prophecies to them, the exiles are taught that they are the fortunate

ones.

Both the city and the entire land are under the most devastating of judgments. As in Jeremiah's prophecy of the good and bad figs in Jeremiah chapter 24, or Ezekiel's prophecy of the hare, the situation of the exiles is presented as far more fortunate than is that of those who still remain in the land.

The high places and the altars and the other sites of idolatry had brought about the Lord's judgment upon his people, but those places will now also be subject to his judgment themselves.

The altars will be desolated, the idols broken, and the incense altars destroyed, and they will all be defiled as dead men's bones are scattered all around them. We might here recall the judgment of the man of God from Judah upon the idolatrous site at Bethel in 1 Kings chapter 13.

[4 : 53] When Israel first entered into the promised land, they had been charged to destroy all of the sites of idolatry within it, making no compromise with such idolatry themselves, nor multiplying shrines throughout the land in competition to the one appropriate site of worship in the tabernacle or temple.

Now, as they had failed to observe the Lord's charge, the same devastating judgment that fell upon the Canaanites is going to fall upon them. One particular dimension of the judgment they will face is the defilement of the land and its sites of worship with their dead bodies, and the dishonoring of their corpses by being cast out upon the land as food for carrion creatures.

Even in the middle of the horrific judgments that the Lord declared would fall upon his people in the curses of the covenant, he had held forth to them a promise of the preservation of a scattered remnant, a remnant that, from their devastation and self-loathing, would one day be brought back as a restored people.

Leviticus chapter 26 verses 39 to 42 And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity, and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them.

But if they confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them, and brought them into the land of their enemies, If then their uncircumcised heart is humbled, and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

[6 : 31] In Ezekiel's prophecy against the mountains of Israel, he speaks of those of the people who will remember the Lord among the nations. They will start to recognize the Lord's hand in their distress, but also his heart towards them, his distress at their deep and persistent betrayal of him.

Their remembrance of the Lord will involve a sort of coming to their senses, a recognition of their character in his sight, and an intense self-loathing and disgust at their rebellion.

As they recognize this, the faithful and holy character of the Lord will become utterly apparent to them in the disaster that he brought upon them, just as he had promised that he would centuries ago.

The Lord had been consistent with his word and with his character. A new part of the oracle begins in verse 11, with the instruction to Ezekiel to clap his hands and to stamp his foot.

The meaning of these actions is not immediately clear. Are they celebratory actions? Do they express anger, or maybe scorn, or schadenfreude? In chapter 21 verse 17, as Bloch observes, the gesture is associated with the Lord's anger.

[7 : 37] I also will clap my hands, and I will satisfy my fury. I, the Lord, have spoken. Moshe Greenberg points to chapter 25 verse 3 and 6 as evidence that the gestures are connected with malicious glee.

In verse 3 of that chapter, Say to the Ammonites, Hear the word of the Lord God. Thus says the Lord God, Because you said, Aha! Over my sanctuary when it was profaned, and over the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and over the house of Judah when they went into exile.

And then on to verse 6, For thus says the Lord God, Because you have clapped your hands, and stamped your foot, and rejoiced with all the malice within your soul against the land of Israel.

As Bloch argues, By instructing Ezekiel to perform these gesticulations, he wants Ezekiel to convey something of his anger towards his people. In his prophetic theatre to this point, Ezekiel has represented the Lord's relationship to his people on several occasions and in different ways.

He continues to do this in these actions. Having performed these gestures, he proceeds to speak about the disasters that will pursue the people, the pestilence, the sword, and the famine,

destroying both those near at hand and those far away.

[8 : 51] Bloch observes that, as in the sign of the three parts of the hair, there are three discernible groups in concentric circles, those far away, the scattered group, those nearby, the group around the city, those that remain, the group destroyed within the city.

The oracle began with a focus upon the land, with the prophecy against the mountains, and it returns to this at the end, the air of the places of idolatry, which had once been scented with incense rising to the false gods, will become thick with the putrid stench of dead bodies.

The land will be swept clean of its people, rendered utterly desolate. A question to consider. The idolatry of the people is connected with their whoring heart in verse 9.

What is the connection between idolatry and adultery, and how is this relationship explored elsewhere in scripture? How might this relationship help us better to understand the Lord's judgment against the idolatry of his people here?

How many

