

Ezekiel 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 June 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Ezekiel chapter 14 And yet comes to the prophet.

And yet comes to a prophet to consult me through him. I the Lord will answer him myself. And I will set my face against that man. I will make him a sign and a byword, and cut him off from the midst of my people. And you shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I the Lord have deceived that prophet.

And I will stretch out my hand against him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. And they shall bear their punishment. The punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike.

That the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves any more with all their transgressions. But that they may be my people, and I may be their God, declares the Lord God.

[1 : 52] And the word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its supply of bread, and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord God.

If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they ravage it, and it be made desolate, so that no one may pass through because of the beasts, even if these three men were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters.

They alone would be delivered, but the land would be desolate. Or if I bring a sword upon that land, and say, Let a sword pass through the land, and I cut off from it man and beast, though these three men were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters, but they alone would be delivered.

Or if I send a pestilence into that land, and pour out my wrath upon it with blood, to cut off from it man and beast, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither son nor daughter, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness.

For thus says the Lord God, How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast?

[3 : 23] But behold, some survivors will be left in it, sons and daughters who will be brought out. Behold, when they come out to you, and you see their ways and their deeds, you will be consoled for the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem, for all that I have brought upon it.

They will console you when you see their ways and their deeds, and you shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, declares the Lord God. Ezekiel chapter 14 contains further oracles addressed to the house of Israel and its leaders.

The first oracle is occasioned by a delegation of elders of the exilic community coming to inquire of Ezekiel, much as they did in chapter 8 verse 1. They are presumably seeking some word from the Lord to address the situation of the community, and as in chapter 8, the Lord gives a word to Ezekiel in response to their visit.

However, the response of the Lord is one of deep displeasure. In verse 3, the Lord's initial response is to Ezekiel himself. Before he delivers the word of the Lord to the elders and the community, Ezekiel is brought into a deeper awareness of the Lord's heart towards his people, in this case by reflecting upon how presumptuous the inquiry of the elders is, considering the treachery that they are engaged in, giving their hearts to idols.

They are utterly unmindful of the fact that the Lord is a jealous God. The elders have taken idols into their hearts. Some commentators have understood the descriptions of the elders here as

referring to the wearing of amulets or idolatrous tattoos upon their chests.

[4 : 55] But as Daniel Black rightly argues, this is an overly literalistic reading of the terminology. Rather, the problem is that their hearts are still set upon idolatry, the very sin for which they were sent away into exile in the first place.

Notwithstanding the presumptuous character of the elders' inquiry, the Lord still gives them an answer, but not to their inquiry. He does not answer in a way that would justify their presumption, but rather speaks directly to their idolatry and presumption by condemning them.

They have come before the Lord with the multitude of their idols still in their hearts. The Lord has determined to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, whose hearts are estranged from him through idolatry, even when they go through the motions of seeking his face.

Israel is like a wife who feigns to love and be faithful to her husband, even while she is constantly lusting after her lovers and pursuing affairs with them on the side. The Lord presents an urgent warning to the house of Israel.

There remains still a slim possibility that, if they would put away their adulteries, they might know the sort of covenant relationship with the Lord that he had always intended for them. However, all of those who provoke the Lord to jealousy by persisting in idolatry, even while inciting the Lord by inquiring of him by the prophet, would be utterly cut off.

[6 : 12] They would face the judgment that was to fall upon the person who would lead others astray into idolatry, in the book of Deuteronomy, for instance. Such people would be cautionary examples to everyone else.

In 1 Kings chapter 22, we see the Lord placing a lying spirit in the mouths of all of Ahab's prophets, and even though the faithful prophet Micaiah alerts him to this fact, King Ahab's heart is still set on the falsehood.

Those whose hearts are devoted to idols yet inquire of the Lord would also be sent such deception and delusion, as would the prophets who served them. In such a manner the Lord would deal with the adulterous idolatry of the house of Israel, which had estranged their hearts from him.

We see a similar warning in the context of the prophesied coming of the lawless one, in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 9 to 12. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan, with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

[7 : 25] One of the surprising points of that passage in 2 Thessalonians is that genuine love for the truth must in many ways precede belief in the truth. And conversely, those who do not love the truth, and those whose hearts are given to lies, will easily accept delusions, even when they retain some knowledge that they are not true.

There is a sort of collaboration and falsehood between the person who consults the false prophet, their hearts being set upon lies, and the false prophet whose heart is given to the lies, and is easily taken in delusions, and give flattering falsehoods to the persons who seek them.

As the Lord dealt decisively with both the false prophets and those who sought them, the people would know that he was the Lord. Verses 12 to 20 present the hypothetical case of a land that has proved deeply unfaithful.

Such a land faces a fourfold judgment, famine, wild beasts, sword and pestilence. There are several allusions back to Leviticus chapter 26 here, and to the curses of the covenant.

We might also think of Ezekiel chapter 5 verse 17. I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will rob you of your children. Pestilence and blood shall pass through you, and I will bring the sword upon you.

[8 : 40] I am the Lord. I have spoken. We encounter similar statements in places like Jeremiah chapter 15 verses 2 to 3. And when they ask you, Where shall we go?

You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Those who are for pestilence to pestilence, and those who are for the sword to the sword, those who are for famine to famine, and those who are for captivity to captivity.

I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the Lord, the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy.

The certainty of the destruction of such a land is such that even the most famous intercessors and righteous men would only be delivered themselves in the case of its destruction.

Faithful Noah was saved with seven other people, his sons and their wives and his wife. But in the disaster facing such a nation, a man such as Noah could not be certain of saving his family.

[9 : 35] Job was famous as a righteous man who feared God and eschewed evil, one who persevered under trial and was vindicated as a result. Job's family were directly implicated in his testing and in his blessing.

Job interceded for his children, and we have every reason to believe that he was heard. However, in the case of such an unfaithful nation, even the prayers of a faithful man like Job would prove ineffectual.

The surprising figure on this list is Daniel, or Dan-el. Scholars often dismiss the idea that this could be the Daniel of the biblical book, and not without some reason. If we think about it, Daniel is a young contemporary of Ezekiel, and the great deeds and prophecies associated with him are still at this point in history.

In the future, why would such a figure be listed along with Job and Noah? For this reason, scholars have put forward other candidates as possible figures that might be referred to here.

It might be the Dan-el mentioned in Jubilees chapter 4 verse 20, the maternal grandfather of Methuselah. Others have seen it as the righteous Ugaritic king, Dan-el.

[10 : 38] However, neither of these two cases seem to be in any way remarkable enough to justify inclusion in such a list of three persons. We don't even know if the righteous king Dan-el was viewed to be a servant of Yahweh.

Also, when we return to consider the identification of this figure with the canonical figure of Daniel, the case really isn't as weak as it might originally seem. The younger Daniel, tested in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and interpreting the king's dreams, sets himself apart from others and is raised up to high status.

As a result of his faithfulness and wisdom, the king of Babylon himself declares the sovereignty of the Lord. One can imagine that the faithfulness of this man Daniel resulted in a considerable amelioration of the lot of the Judahite exiles and also of their king Jehoiakim.

Here is a man who, through his individual righteousness, has blessed a whole nation. But what the Lord is saying here, that in the case of this unfaithful nation that he's speaking about, even a man as faithful as this man Daniel would only save himself.

No one else would be saved or blessed on his account. Verses 13-20 are a four-panel list of the potential judgments that might face such a nation. In verses 13-14, famine, 15-16, wild beasts, 17-18, the sword, and then 19-20, pestilence.

[12 : 00] In all of these cases, the judgment is certain and irrevocable. Even the most famously faithful people, of the current time or of the distant past, could only save their own skins through their faithfulness.

And if the hypothetical land of verses 12-20 faces such certain judgment, how much more so Jerusalem? After all of the blessings and the warnings and the privileges that Jerusalem had enjoyed, how would they be spared of the fourfold judgment of sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence?

No, they would not be spared. They would be utterly cut off. Both man and beast would be scoured off the land. However, there is a surprising twist. Some survivors would be left in it.

Sons and daughters not saved by the faithfulness of any righteous men within the land. No such salvation was possible, as we saw earlier. But purely by God's grace, they would join the exiles in Babylon.

However, such people, though spared, would not share in the blessings that would be enjoyed by a reformed and renewed nation made out of the Jewish exiles in Babylon after their hearts were circumcised.

[13 : 05] Rather, they would be evidence of the justice of the Lord's judgment. Their wickedness, seen by the exiles in Babylon, would be evidence that God had acted justly in his destruction of Jerusalem.

A question to consider. Verses 12 to 20 present us with the fact that, in ordinary times, faithful people can save others around them. Can you think of examples in Scripture where the faithfulness of particular individuals led to the salvation of many others, even though those others were not

righteous themselves?

