

Ezekiel 47: 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: 21 June 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Ezekiel chapter 47 with a measuring line in his hand.

The man measured a thousand cubits and then led me through the water and it was ankle deep. Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water and it was knee deep. Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water and it was waist deep. Again he measured a thousand and it was a river that I could not pass through for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in a river that could not be passed through. And he said to me, Son of man, have you seen this?

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. As I went back I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Araba and enters the sea.

When the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh, so everything will live where the river goes.

[1 : 33] Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From En Gedi to En Eglim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the great sea.

But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh. They are to be left for salt. And on the banks on both sides of the river there will grow all kinds of trees for food.

Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail. But they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. Thus says the Lord God, This is the boundary by which you shall divide the land for inheritance among the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph shall have two portions, and you shall divide equally what I swore to give to your fathers.

This land shall fall to you as your inheritance. This shall be the boundary of the land. On the north side, from the great sea by way of Hethlon to Libo-Hamath, and on to Zedad, Berotha, Sibraim, which lies on the border between Damascus and Hamath, as far as Hazar-Hatakan, which is on the border of Horan, so the boundary shall run from the sea to Hazar-Inan, which is on the northern border of Damascus, with the border of Hamath to the north.

[2 : 46] This shall be the north side. On the east side, the boundary shall run between Horan and Damascus, along the Jordan between Gilead and the land of Israel, to the eastern sea, and as far as Tamar.

This shall be the east side. On the south side, it shall run from Tamar as far as the waters of Meribah-Kadesh, from there along the brook of Egypt to the great sea. This shall be the south side. On the west side, the great sea shall be the boundary to a point opposite Libo-Hamath. This shall be the west side. So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel.

You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves, and for the sojourners who reside among you, and have had children among you. They shall be to you as native-born children of Israel. With you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.

In whatever tribe the sojourner resides, there you shall assign him his inheritance, declares the Lord God. The book of Ezekiel ends with an extended vision of a restored Israel.

[3 : 44] The vision is of a symbolic restored order, rather than that of the actual concrete restored order. In its glorious temple, within which the Lord has once more taken up his residence, and its reordered land, we get a sense of what Israel could be, and how the Lord would re-establish it after the exile.

The details of its design and its measurements are densely symbolic. Among other things, they present a jubilee-shaped reality. Ezekiel chapter 47 is the penultimate chapter of the book.

It extends the hero's attention out beyond the temple and the city, and their practices, and into the wider land. Life flows forth from the temple to purify and water the land, and the land is then divided. In Genesis chapter 2, from the Garden of Eden, came a riverhead that divided into four great rivers, verses 10 to 14 of that chapter. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.

The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good. Medallium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon.

[4 : 53] It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Garden of Eden was the original earthly sanctuary, a realm where the Lord dwelt in the midst of his people.

It's a model for the wider world. It's a source of living water that flowed out into it. Both the tabernacle and Solomon's temple had a lot of creation and Edenic symbolism.

And the same is true of Ezekiel's temple. Back in chapter 43, the altar had to be purified for its use for sacrifice. The land, however, is also impure, defiled by the iniquities of the people.

However, now that the Lord is once more dwelling in the midst of his people, life can flow out to heal and revive a devastated land. In his vision, Ezekiel is brought to the door of the temple once more, where he sees water issuing from below its threshold facing east.

The stream trickles out toward the east, but rather than moving in a straight eastward direction, its course is more towards the southeast. Having seen the stream issuing forth from the sanctuary, Ezekiel is then led via the north gate, round to the outside of the east-facing outer gate.

[6 : 06] As the Lord had entered via the east gate on his return to the temple, it was closed to others leaving the temple by means of it, as chapter 44 verses 1 to 2 say. So Ezekiel had to take a slightly more circuitous route to get there.

Outside of the temple, Ezekiel sees the stream again, this time trickling out of the south side of the east gate. From the side of the temple, the water is directed towards the Dead Sea.

The observant hero will notice that the bronze sea of Solomon's temple was situated at the southeast corner of the house, but there is no bronze sea in Ezekiel's temple.

In Ezekiel's temple, the stream proceeding from the house toward the south of the threshold, towards the east, takes the place of the bronze sea and the chariots of water associated with it.

Conversely, the stream of Ezekiel's temple can help us better to understand the symbolism of the bronze sea in Solomon's temple. Ezekiel's guide leads Ezekiel through the stream as they follow it.

[7 : 06] He measures it four times at 1,000 cubit intervals. The first time, the water is ankle-deep. The second, at 2,000 cubits. It is knee-deep. The third, at 3,000 cubits.

It's waist-deep. The fourth measurement, at 4,000 cubits, is the final one. The water is then too deep to pass through on foot. The stream flowing from the presence of the Lord is miraculously growing as it moves on.

The river Head of Eden, split into four great rivers to water the whole earth. Here, the four measurements at 1,000 cubit intervals might imply the water's purpose for the cleansing of the whole land.

The bank of the river is made wonderfully fertile, abounding with trees on both sides, where once was barren wilderness. The guide informs Ezekiel that the water from the temple flows towards the east and down into the Araba and the Dead or Salt Sea.

The Dead Sea, a region that was formerly very fertile, was the region where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had once been. It was devastated at the time of their cataclysmic destruction, which some scientists have recently speculated was the result of the explosion of a meteor above them, similar to that which occurred at Tunguska in Siberia.

[8 : 19] One of the most verdant and fruitful realms of the land was rendered uninhabitable and inhospitable to life for centuries to come. However, now this dead land, and its literally dead sea, are awakened into new life.

An old judgment is not only lifted, but reversed. Land which was once cursed, is now bountifully blessed. Everywhere that the water from the presence of the Lord flows, things are made fruitful. Other passages in Scripture speak of the flowing out of healing waters from Jerusalem, a symbol of national cleansing, renewal and blessing, as the land is purified and made fruitful by the Lord's return.

Zechariah chapter 14 verse 8, for instance. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea, and half of them to the western sea.

It shall continue in summer as in winter. Joel chapter 3 verse 18, And in that day the mountain shall drip sweet wine, and the hill shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water, and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord, and water the valley of Shittim.

[9 : 27] Behind such prophetic images, we might also see statements as that of Psalm 46 verses 4 to 5. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. Not only does the water from the presence of the Lord heal the land, it also heals the sea.

The sea that was once salt now is made fresh, and teems with living creatures, as the waters did back in Genesis chapter 1. En Gedi and Eglim, likely two cities on either side of the formerly Dead Sea, geographically bracket that entire body of water, which will now be a place of fruitfulness and life, with abundant fish of many different kinds.

It is a plentiful source for fishermen. There will be, however, some remnants of swamps and marshland. Daniel Bloch suggests that this might be on account of the economic value of the minerals found in such locations.

However, we would probably be better off looking for some symbolic meaning to this. Evergreen trees would flourish on the banks, bearing fresh fruit every month. The description of the trees might recall the description of the righteous man in Psalm 1 verse 3.

[10 : 41] He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. Of course, since this is a symbolic vision, we might see an image of the restored presence of the Lord in the land, producing new righteous and life-giving pillars of society in the house of Israel.

Most notably, this imagery is taken up in Revelation chapter 22 verses 1 to 2. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city.

Also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. In Revelation, the trees by the river are the tree of life with twelve kinds of fruit.

As in the case of the trees in Ezekiel chapter 47, it yields its fruit every month. The twelve kinds of fruit might alert us to the significance of the monthly yield of fruit, twelve months each year.

The trees, so connected with the number twelve, invite us to see some association with the house of Israel itself. Several scholars have argued that the imagery of this chapter is not merely taken up by John in Revelation, but is also used by him in his gospel, especially in John chapter 21.

[12 : 00] In the gospel of John, the theme of water flowing out from Jesus appears at a number of points. Jesus, of course, is the new temple. In John chapter 7, verses 38 to 39, whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.

Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. Jesus is the source of the Spirit, the new temple from which the gift of the Spirit will flow at Pentecost.

Also in John chapter 19, verse 34, when Jesus is on the cross. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. All of this leads us to John chapter 21, where the disciples, by the instruction of the resurrected Christ, take in a miraculous catch of fish.

Strangely, the exact number of these fish is given to us, 153. It seems surprising that the disciples will be counting fish when the risen Christ is with them. However, Jesus had previously charged them to take note of the numbers of the baskets of leftovers that they had gathered after feeding the 5,000 and the 4,000.

It seems likely that they counted and recorded the number of fish here at Christ's own instruction. 153, as St. Augustine noticed, is the triangular number of 17.

[13 : 24] When you add up 17 and 16 and 15 and 14 and 13, all the way down to 1, you get a total of 153. An important feature of Hebrew and Greek is the fact that letters can also function as numbers.

The practice of determining the numerical value of particular words is called gematria. It is widely held by commentators that John uses this in Revelation for the number 666.

Early Christians were familiar with the use of gematria, and in the epistle of Barnabas, one of the earliest Christian texts that we have, gematria is used to determine the symbolic meaning of the 318 men who accompany Abraham in Genesis chapter 14.

The place names of Ezekiel chapter 47 verse 10, mentioned in connection with the great abundance of fish, are En-Gedi and En-Eglim. The numeric value associated with the first is 17. The numeric value associated with the second is 153. By itself, this might just be a curiosity. However, as John speaks of life-giving water flowing out, and the number 153 is the number of a great catch of fish, this seems to be less random.

[14 : 38] That this number would be connected with the one verse in the Old Testament that speaks of such a remarkable catch of fish is clearly remarkable, but once we have seen the connections, it is probably not a weak one.

While the typical hero of John chapter 21 will think little of the number, seeing it as but a reference to a historical detail, the close reader might discover an authenticating sign of the connection with Ezekiel's prophecy.

The barren land made fertile with trees might connect with the restoration of the people of Israel. The barren waters made fruitful with fish might connect with the cleansing and enlivening of the resident aliens within the land, making them participants in the life of the Lord's people too. In chapter 16, the Lord had said that Sodom and Samaria would return to their former state. Perhaps part of the meaning here is that the non-Israelite peoples of the land and the resident aliens, once judged and cursed in the destruction of Sodom, are now going to enjoy the blessings of the Lord too and be knit in to the wider people.

Internal to the symbolic picture of the passage, it also makes the territories of the tribes in the lower part of the land fertile. The rest of the chapter presents the boundaries of the restored land.

[15 : 51] This begins a reallocation of the territory of the land in the chapter that follows, envisaging a sort of renewal of the initial entry into and possession of the land, with each of the 12 tribes being allocated their own inheritance.

The land, notably, does not include the Transjordanian territories of Reuben Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. Those territories were never within the promised land proper, but were parts of Israel outside of the land.

Rather, the territory as described in Ezekiel chapter 47 most closely corresponds to the territories marked out in Numbers chapter 34, verses 1 to 12. All of the tribes would now fully enter into the possession of the promised land proper, even though their respective territories are much changed within it.

One of the most arresting and significant features of the new arrangement is the fact that faithful resident aliens that have settled among the Israelites and had children among them should be included within the nation, being apportioned territories with the tribes in whose territory they reside. Isaiah chapter 56, verses 6 to 7 speak of something similar. Resident aliens had hitherto been prevented from possessing land in such a manner.

[17 : 25] However, now the blessings of God's presence are spreading out further. This is, I believe, connected with the vision of the waters of the inland salt sea being made fresh. Former Gentile outsiders are rendered insiders to the covenant, the many fish of the resident aliens joining the many trees of the land.

A question to consider. How does Ezekiel's vision and the historical situation it prophesies anticipate the greater flowing forth of blessings through the death and resurrection of Christ?