

Ezekiel 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 17. He placed it beside abundant waters, he set it like a willow twig, and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine, and produced branches, and put out boughs.

And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage. And behold, this vine bent its roots toward him, and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it. It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit, and become a noble vine.

Say, Thus says the Lord God, Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots and cut off its fruit, so that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots. Behold, it is planted. Will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it, wither away on the bed where it sprouted?

Then the word of the Lord came to me. Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes, and brought them to him to Babylon.

And he took one of the royal offspring, and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath, the chief men of the land he had taken away, that the kingdom might be humble, and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand.

[1 : 5 9] But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?

As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die.

Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things. He shall not escape.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, As I live, surely it is my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head.

I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon, and enter into judgment with him there, for the treachery he has committed against me.

[3 : 0 1] And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken. Thus says the Lord God, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches, and produce fruit, and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird. In the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest, and all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree. Dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord, I have spoken, and I will do it.

Ezekiel chapter 17 contains a prophetic parable and its interpretation. In some ways it's similar in form to the sign act of chapter 12, as Ezekiel was instructed to prepare an exile's baggage, dig through the wall of his house, and then leave as an exile in the evening.

Much as Ezekiel's works of prophetic theatre, this parable is ambiguous, a riddle in search of an appropriate interpretation. As in the case of those acts of prophetic theatre, it is followed by some sort of interpretation, and we need to read these two things alongside each other.

[4 : 29] The parable or riddle, and the interpretation that follows, are like a lock and a key that fits it. A prophetic parable or a prophetic sign act provides a different way of viewing a series of events, offering the hearer or the witnesses different perspectives that can be illuminating precisely because of the symbols that they draw upon.

The parable of this chapter is followed by some questions to the audience in verses 9-10. The parable offers a fantastical image. Two eagles, one of the eagles later becoming a sort of gardener, and two plants. There's a shift from a cedar to a vine.

The story has a series of stages that we can identify, three in particular. The great colourful eagle comes to Lebanon and takes the top of the cedar and carries it to the land of trade and the city of merchants.

In the second stage, the eagle takes the seed of the land and plants it in a fertile location near abundant waters. It thrives and becomes a low-spreading vine, directing its boughs towards the eagle or the gardener.

In the final stage, a second-grade eagle appears, although this eagle is less than the first eagle. As Daniel Block observes, this eagle is also distinguished from the first by his passivity.

[5 : 42] He does nothing. The vine, however, starts to direct both its roots and its branches toward the second eagle, and away from the first that had planted it in the fertile soil.

The vine's hope is that the second eagle would water it. The Lord then asks the hearers of the parable a series of questions. What do they expect to happen next in the story? What will happen to the vine? Will it thrive?

Will the eagle not uproot it and cut off its fruit? Will the vine not wither when struck by the east wind? The vine, the Lord knows, could easily be uprooted. It isn't firmly grounded.

It's directed its roots upward toward the second eagle and overstretched its boughs. It is no longer a low-spreading vine. One of the reasons why parables can be so effective is by reframing reality in terms of a different story.

When the person telling the parable challenges his hearers to make judgments on the basis of it, they can often arrive at different assessments than they would if they were being told a straightforward literal account of what was going on.

[6 : 44] By making the familiar strange, the parable offers people a different way of seeing things, and the possibility of breaking out of set judgments. Verses 11 to 21 present the divine interpretation of the parable.

It's the key that corresponds to the lock. It's important to recognize that the interpretation belongs with the parable. Taken by itself, as Marsha Greenberg notes, several different interpretations would be possible.

If we were reading the parable by itself, a number of its symbols could be read in different directions. Indeed, this ambiguity and this symbolic polyvalence is one of the reasons why the parable can be effective.

Is the cedar Israel? How about the vine? We might think, for instance, of the similarities between this passage and Psalm 80 verses 8 to 11. You brought a vine out of Egypt.

You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade. The mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea.

[7 : 45] And it shoots to the river. This might suggest, for instance, that the first eagle is the Lord. How about the second eagle? Is the second eagle some false god? Is the well-watered land Israel, as John Taylor argues?

Or is it Babylon, as Peter Lighthouse and it seems Daniel Block also suggest? The parable taken by itself, then, is ambiguous and could easily be misinterpreted or interpreted in several different ways.

Block observes a close and highly developed series of parallels between the parable and its interpretation, with the elements of the one mapping quite clearly onto the other, all the way down to the rhetorical questions.

The great eagle is the king of Babylon. The crown of the cedar is Jerusalem and its topmost shoot, the king and his officials. The land of commerce and city of traders is Babylon.

The seedling of the land is the member of the royal line. The planting of the seedling is the covenant that the king of Babylon makes with the member of the royal line, clearing space for him by removing the nobility of the land.

[8 : 47] Block argues that the well-watered land refers to the care that Nebuchadnezzar showed to Jehoiachin in Babylon. This, to my mind at least, however, goes against the parallelism that he notes.

I believe that the well-watered land is better understood as Israel itself, in the condition of being under the covenant with the king of Babylon. The low spreading of the vine corresponds with the king of Babylon's intent to humble the kingdom.

The turning of the vine towards the second eagle is the king's treachery and breaking of the covenant with the king of Babylon by turning of his sights to Egypt, seeking to raise an army from that quarter.

The Lord's judgment seems to correspond to the east wind. We've already had an image of a vine a few chapters earlier, with the wood of the dead vine in chapter 15.

We should probably read these symbols alongside each other. Nebuchadnezzar chopped off the top of the cedar in 597 BC when he attacked Jerusalem, removing Jehoiachin and bringing him to Babylon.

[9 : 44] Mataniah, whom Nebuchadnezzar renamed Zedekiah, was placed on the throne in Jehoiachin's place. He put Zedekiah under oath, but Zedekiah looked away from Babylon to Egypt, hoping to find aid from that quarter as we see in Jeremiah chapter 27.

Zedekiah gathered kings from the region to plot rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, and was condemned by the Lord for it. The Egyptians ended up failing Zedekiah. Even though signs looked promising for a brief period of time, the hope in Egypt proved vain.

No effective deliverance or assistance from that quarter materialized. Zedekiah's breaking of the covenant with Babylon is described in 2 Chronicles chapter 36, verses 11-13.

Zedekiah was 21 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 11 years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the Lord.

He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the Lord, the God of Israel. The covenant with Babylon, being enforced by an oath to God himself, was seen by the Lord as a matter of loyalty to him.

[10 : 57] To break that covenant was to despise the oath of the Lord, and the covenant with the Lord. The consequences for Zedekiah and his people would be severe, not just from Nebuchadnezzar, his suzerain, but primarily from the Lord, the God of the covenant that he had despised by his action.

The Lord would hunt Zedekiah down. He would be the one that would trap Zedekiah and send him off to Babylon. In verses 19 to 21, we see that the Lord's hand is behind everything.

In verses 22 to 24, there's a surprising shift in the way that the story is told. We once again return to the opening image of the parable. But there's a switch in the identity of the eagle.

It was Babylon in the first instance. But later, in this case, it refers to God himself. The cedar reappears. The cedar could be seen as the glorious house of David, particularly typified in the temple and the cedars that are used to construct it and the palaces of the king.

The cedar is an image of the Davidic rule at its height. The Lord himself would take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and while the cedar itself might be felled, he would establish a new cedar from a tender twig taken from it.

[12 : 07] Our boericultural images of the kingdom and its rulers are very common within the prophets, these images of trees and their planting. We might think of the image of David and the branch, or the shoot from the root of Jesse, or the stump of the felled kingdom in Isaiah chapter 6.

Great rulers like Nebuchadnezzar himself in the second dream interpreted by Daniel in Daniel chapter 4 can be described as great trees that grow up and give shade to many creatures.

This young and tender twig from the sprig from the top of the cedar would be preserved. It would be brought back to the place of its original planting, and after that great tree of the cedar had been felled, a new one would be planted, and this one would flourish on a high and lofty mountain.

Here we see the image of the cosmic mountain, and the image of the cosmic tree coming together. This great tree on the top of this high mountain, in some sense provide an image of the union of heaven and earth, and provide a gathering place for all the creatures.

The preservation and replanting of this tree, from this tender shoot, would be a proof to all of the trees of the field, all of these great nations and rulers, that the Lord is God, the one who is sovereign over history and all of its events.

[13 : 21] He is the one who brings high those who are low, and brings low those who are raised up. He is the one who demonstrates his identity by keeping his word, and enacting his will in history.

Fittingly, the parable and its interpretation, ends with another recognition formula. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. Even when the vine from the second and third acts of the parable is destroyed, the cedar whose top was removed at the beginning, would be restored.

The hope of the house of Israel will be fulfilled, not finally in Zedekiah and his kingdom, but in the Lord's bringing life from the death of exile. A question to consider.

Where in the New Testament do we see imagery from this parable, or similar to this parable, employed?