

Ezekiel 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 11. The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the Lord, which faces east. And behold, at the entrance of the gateway there were twenty-five men, and I saw among them Jeazaniah the son of Azur, and Pelletiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people. And he said to me, Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity, and who give wicked counsel in this city, who say, The time is not near to build houses.

This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat. Therefore prophesy against them. Prophesy, O son of man. And the Spirit of the Lord fell upon me, and he said to me, Say, Thus says the Lord, So you think, O house of Israel, for I know the things that come into your mind. You have multiplied your slain in this city, and have filled its streets with the slain. Therefore thus says the Lord God, your slain whom you have laid in the midst of it, they are the meat. And this city is the cauldron, but you shall be brought out of the midst of it. You have feared the sword, and I will bring the sword upon you, declares the Lord God. And I will bring you out of the midst of it, and give you into the hands of foreigners, and execute judgments upon you. You shall fall by the sword, I will judge you at the border of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord. This city shall not be your cauldron, nor shall you be the meat in the midst of it. I will judge you at the border of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord. For you have not walked in my statutes, nor obeyed my rules, but have acted according to the rules of the nations that are around you. And it came to pass, while I was prophesying, that Pelletiah the son of Benaiah died. Then I fell down on my face, and cried out with a loud voice, and said, Our Lord God, will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel? And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, your brothers, even your brothers, your kinsmen, the whole house of

Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Go far from the Lord, to us this land is given for a possession. Therefore say, Thus says the Lord God, Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone. Therefore say, Thus says the Lord God, I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things, and all its abominations. And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes, and keep my rules, and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the

Lord God. Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city. And the Spirit lifted me up, and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen went up from me. And I told the exiles all the things that the Lord had shown me. In chapter 8, while the elders of Judah were with him in his house in the land of exile, Ezekiel began to receive a vision, in which he was taken to the temple in Jerusalem, saw the abominations performed there, the declaration of a sentence of destruction upon the city, and the Lord's departure from his sanctuary. This vision concludes in chapter 11. While this chapter represents a new phase of the vision, it connects with that which preceded it in several ways. In verse 19 of the preceding chapter, the throne chariot stood at the east gate of the temple. In the first verse of this chapter, Ezekiel is lifted up to the throne chariot there. The 25 men at the gate recall chapter 8, verse 16,

As Daniel Block notes, there are other recollections of the earlier chapters of the vision. For instance, to chapter 9, verse 8, in verse 13. The Spirit lifts up Ezekiel again, moving him to his next location on his tour of inspection of the temple and the abominations performed there, and his witnessing of the subsequent departure of the Lord from his house. Two of the 25 men are mentioned, Jeazaniah the son of Azur, a man who should not be mistaken with Jeazaniah the son of Shaphan, who was earlier mentioned among the 70 men performing idolatry in the closed chamber, and Pelletiah the son of Benaiah. The 25 appear to be elders. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that they are the heads of the priestly houses, and therefore counsellors of the rulers of the city.

[5 : 19] The Lord accuses them as wicked counsellors, committed to iniquity. The meaning of their words in verse 3 is challenging to determine, as their statement is open to several different interpretations. Are they referring to refraining from building houses nearby, or to building them soon, or are they referring to starting households? The men here are presumably those who came to power as the old elite was deported to Babylon with Jehoiakim. Their statement probably indicates their complacency and indifference to the plight of the poor of the city. They see no need to provide them with housing, having either taken over much of the existing housing when they came to power, or determined to use all of the resources for the defence of the city. The meaning of the second part of their statement could also be interpreted in different ways. The image of meat in a cauldron is one that Ezekiel will use again in chapter 24. Jeremiah chapter 1 also represents the city of Jerusalem as a cauldron, about to be overturned by a force coming from the north. Are we to understand the statement of the 25 men as comparing themselves to the choice pieces of meat in a stew? Bloch suggests that the cauldron should rather be understood as a crock or a storage vessel. The men presume themselves to be safe within the protective confines of the fortified city. While the old ruling class was removed and scattered from the container as waste, they are secure within it. However, as the Lord will make clear, this is far from the case. Ezekiel is given an urgent command to prophesy against the rulers of

Jerusalem. The spirit of the Lord rushes upon him, and he is instructed as to what he must say. The leaders of Jerusalem are oppressive and exploitative. They have filled the city with victims of their injustice. Their presumption will be proven ill-founded. They think that they are the prime pieces of meat, safely preserved within the crock, yet they are the butchers, and the people that they have slain are the meat. They themselves will be removed from the city, and will suffer the sword, being killed by foreigners acting as the Lord's executioners, the very fate that they had fancied themselves immune to. When the Lord delivers his sentence upon them, his identity and sovereignty will be decisively demonstrated. They have rejected the law of the Lord, and have walked according to the customs of the nations. So the Lord has given them into their hands. As Ezekiel prophesies, Pelletiah the son of Benaiah, one of the twenty-five men, died.

His death is a sign of the fate apportioned for all of the men. It is also a sign of the Lord's causing the word of Ezekiel to be effective. The fact that Ezekiel is still physically situated in his house in Chaldea, naturally raises questions about how we are to understand this event.

Ezekiel recognises Pelletiah, so he seems to be a specific historical figure. It seems most likely to me that Pelletiah was literally at the gate of the temple in Jerusalem with the other men at the time, and died as Ezekiel prophesied in his vision. Later, we can presume, when news from Jerusalem next reached the exiles, they would hear about the sudden and strange death of Pelletiah at the gate, and when it occurred. This would serve as a confirmation of the words of Ezekiel, both to the exiles and to any messenger. In verses 14 and 15, the Lord reveals the way that the inhabitants of Jerusalem regard the exiles. The Lord describes the exiles in a somewhat surprising way, using language that intensifies the hearer's sense of their kinship with Ezekiel. Even though Ezekiel was warned in the opening vision of the book that he should expect their strong resistance, they remain his people.

The Lord also speaks of them as the whole house of Israel, as those who carry the baton of Israel's continuing peoplehood, as it were. However, the Judahites in Jerusalem have dismissed the exiles, regarding themselves as the true possessors of the land. The exiles have been cut off, but they suppose that they retain their stake in the land. We can readily imagine that many of the exiles themselves would have considered their situation similarly. However, in a startling statement in verse 16, the Lord declares that he has been the sanctuary of the exiles, even in a foreign and far-off land.

[9 : 34] The leaders of Jerusalem have presumed that, since they have the temple and the glory of the Lord within it, they enjoy a privileged and maybe even an immune status. Yet, as we saw in the preceding chapters, the glory of the Lord had left the building of the temple. Furthermore, as was seen in the opening vision of Ezekiel, the glory chariot of the Lord, connected with the temple, was found far outside of the land of Israel, in Chaldea among the exiles. While the exiles had been uprooted from the land, the Lord was also present with them. The false confidence of the men in Jerusalem is challenged here by Ezekiel. Having spoken of the leaders of Jerusalem, Ezekiel turns to address the exiles in verse 17 and following. Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 6 famously foretold that, after the curse of exile had come upon the people, they would be restored from the land of their exile.

In particular, it promised that the Lord would address the most fundamental problem of the covenant, the problem with the people's hearts. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. Having circumcised the hearts of the people, the covenant could finally begin to be kept. The process of restoration would reunite people and land, taking the scattered exiles and bringing them back to their ancestral land, replanting them, though they had formerly been uprooted. On their return they would cleanse the land of its idolatries and pollutions. Perhaps one of the most striking features of the returned people is the contrast between the pervasive idolatry prior to the exile and the relative rarity of the practice of idolatry in Israel after the return. If they are to be restored and established in covenant relationship with the Lord again, their rebellious hearts have to be addressed. We find similar promises of changed hearts and new covenant to the ones that we find here in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah chapter 24 verses 6 to 7.

I will set my eyes on them for good and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord and they shall be my people and I will be their God for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

And perhaps most famously, Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their guard and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more.

Here the Lord speaks of the removal of their heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh. James Jordan has speculated that in addition to the stubbornness, rebellion and hard-heartedness of the people referred to by it, the heart of stone might also refer to the tablets of the law, which were in the symbolic heart of the people in the Holy of Holies. However, the law was there engraved upon stone and it would later be enfleshed in transformed hearts committed to the worship and service of the Lord in faithfulness. This is in keeping with the broader new covenant and biblical theme of the movement of the word of the Lord from an external to an internalised word. With such a renewed heart, they would be equipped to obey the law. The result would be a renewed covenant situation, with God being the people's God and they being his people, a key formula which expresses the ideal covenant bond, which we see in a number of the quotes from Jeremiah, for instance. However, this restoration and renewal would not be universally enjoyed. Those who gave themselves to idols and other abominations would suffer the devastating consequences. In verse 22 we return to the scene that we left in chapter 10 verse 19, where we read,

[14 : 44] And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the Lord, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. The glory chariot of the Lord is now finally leaving the city. It rises up from the middle of the city in the temple complex, and goes to the Mount of Olives. Perhaps we should recall here the departure of David from Jerusalem by way of the Mount of Olives during the coup of Absalom in 2 Samuel chapter 15.

However, Christians should see a far more powerful and illuminating connection between this and the interplay between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives in the final week of Jesus' ministry prior to his crucifixion. In the final week of his ministry, Christ was constantly alternating between the Temple Mount where he would minister and the Mount of Olives where he would rest. The Temple is finally forsaken, its destruction is foretold, and then Christ leaves the city, crosses the brook Kidron, and ascends the Mount of Olives where he weeps in the garden. After his trials in Jerusalem, he returns to the Mount of Olives where he is crucified, and finally, as he ascends into heaven, it is from the Mount of Olives that he does so. In his vision, Ezekiel returns to Chaldea and the exiles, and he recounts all that he saw to them. One can easily recognize that this would have been a message of considerable consequence for them.

A question to consider. What else can we glean from various biblical passages about the relationship between the exiles in Chaldea and the men who remained in Jerusalem during this particular period of history?