

VISIONS OF JUDGMENT UPON JERUSALEM

EZEKIEL 8:1–11:25

Dub McClish

Introduction

The beginning of the eighth chapter of Ezekiel is reminiscent of the beginning of the first chapter. They both begin with the announcement of a time element, which is given for the purpose of dating the occurrence of the vision that immediately follows. This second great vision the prophet received came in the sixth year of his captivity in Babylon, exactly fourteen months after the first one (cp. 1:1–2 and 8:1).

Chapters 8–11 are a subsection of the first major division of Ezekiel's prophetic message.

Generally, it can be stated that Ezekiel's message centered around the fall of Jerusalem. The book of 48 chapters evenly divides itself into prophecies delivered prior to 586 B.C. (1–24) and prophecies delivered subsequent to Jerusalem's destruction (25–48). It is also observable that generally the prophecies delivered before the city fell are messages of denunciation of the sins of Judah, while those delivered after the fall of the city are such as would raise hopes and bring promises to God's down-trodden people.... The two major divisions of Ezekiel's prophetic message represent different needs in his hearers. They also represent different purposes in God's plan for these people. First, consider the needs of these people before Jerusalem fell. They needed to be made aware of exactly why these tragedies had befallen them. God wanted to be sure that His people were not allowed to assume that they were merely the unfortunate victims of a purposeless historical event.¹

The lengthy vision contained in chapters 8–11 significantly serves the purpose stated above. It revealed to the beleaguered Israelites in captivity both the fact that (1) God was going to pour out His wrath utterly upon Jerusalem and (2) why He was going to do so.

The Vision Of the Abominations in Jerusalem (8:1–18)

The Setting of the Vision (1–6)

Verse 1: Ezekiel was now in the sixth year of his captivity. The fact that he was sitting in his house may indicate that he was in a contemplative pose awaiting an additional word from God. He was not alone: the elders of the Judean exiles were with him. Perhaps, following his first remarkable vision, they had come to see if the prophet might receive another. While this company sat in Ezekiel's house he received his second of many visions and signs: "the hand of the Lord Jehovah fell there upon me."² God is Spirit (John 4:24), and a spirit does not have flesh and bones as the Word did in His human manifestation (Luke 24:39). However, as an accommodation to the simplicity of the thinking of mere mortals, the Holy Spirit frequently uses

anthropomorphisms to describe God and the way He acts. Thus God is described here (as in v. 3) as having a “hand” which He put forth and with which He acted upon the prophet.

Verse 2: Although Ezekiel described a “likeness” rather than a bodily form of a man, he is obviously referring to such (note “his loins” and “he put forth the form of a hand,” v. 3). From the waist downward this person had the appearance of fire, but from the waist upward, the bright appearance of glowing metal (“amber,” KJV). This description is identical to that of the “man” upon the sapphire throne Ezekiel saw in his first vision (1:26–27). He is identified in the first vision as Jehovah before Whom the prophet prostrated himself (v. 28). The identity of this glorious Person in chapter 8 is therefore unmistakable—He is Jehovah God.

Verse 3: The “hand” of Jehovah not only rested upon Ezekiel (v. 1), but it lifted him from the earth and took him to Jerusalem “in the visions of God,” rather than bodily. However, the things God made him to see were as real as if he had been bodily present in the holy city. Ezekiel identified the “hand” of Jehovah that lifted him and entranced him in the Jerusalem visions as the Holy Spirit.³

He was not merely brought to the city, but to the north gate of the inner court of the temple (“the gate of the altar,” v. 5). “It was from this direction that the priests approached the brazen altar.”⁴ The northerly direction will be cited several times subsequently in this vision (vv. 5, 14; 9:2). Just as the abominations were issuing from the temple in a northward direction, so God would soon bring the destruction of the city and the temple from the north by means of the fierce Babylonians.

The temple area will be the focal point of this entire vision. At this north gate of the temple grounds was situated “the seat of the image of jealousy.” It is further described as that “which provoketh to jealousy.” Just what the image was—or was the likeness of—we are not told. The graven image of Asherah which Manasseh had placed in the temple (2 Kin. 21:7) and which was removed and ground to dust by Josiah (23:6) may have been rebuilt. Others speculate that the image was of Baal, of Ashtaroah, or of Tammuz (Eze. 8:14). The identity of the false god is not as important as God’s attitude toward it. He had specified in the very beginning of His covenant to them from Sinai that He was a jealous God Who would not tolerate His people’s bowing down to or serving gods which they themselves manufactured (Exod. 20:3–5). Thus, God’s righteous jealousy was predictably provoked. It was not enough for these apostate people to build their groves and shrines to pagan deities throughout the land—they had to defile the very entrance to God’s temple (and the temple itself, as will shortly be revealed) in their ultimate blasphemy!

Verse 4: In stark contrast with the idol-image, Ezekiel now sees that the glory of God is also at the entrance to the inner court. He knew its identity because it was the same as what he had seen earlier (1:27–28; 8:2). Significantly, God’s glory had already departed from its appointed place on the mercy seat between the cherubim in the holy of holies of the temple; it is at the threshold of the entrance, ready soon to depart entirely. He could not abide the abominations that were being practiced in His house. The true and living God was on His way out of His own temple, being driven out as it were by His own beloved people who preferred lifeless pagan gods to Him. He would soon forsake them utterly to their own devices and destruction.

Verses 5–6: The Lord calls special attention to the abominable “image of jealousy” and the undescribed practices surrounding it (note the northward direction again). He announces to Ezekiel that it is for these idolatrous crimes against Him that He would “go far off” from His sanctuary. This initial scene must have saddened and shocked Ezekiel. He must have been startled to hear God say, “This is bad enough, but there is more.”

The “Secret” Idolatry of the Seventy (7–13)

Verses 7–9: Ezekiel was brought to the entrance of the court surrounding the temple where there were several chambers (cf. Jer. 35:4). Matthew Henry identifies this as the “...outer court, along the sides of which the priests’ lodgings were.”⁵ The prophet discovered a hole in the wall. God commanded him to enlarge it by digging, which revealed a door. He was then ordered to enter the door so as to see the abominations being practiced in the chamber to which it opened. The impression is given that a wall had been erected to shield from public view the chamber about to be entered.

Verse 10: In the room he saw the walls adorned (either carved or painted as a mural) with the likenesses of various forms of animals and “all the idols of the house of Israel” which were being worshiped. Commentators are practically unanimous in attributing the idolatry of this scene to Egyptian sources, but the fact that it involved “all the idols” Israel had adopted seems to make it much broader. Perhaps at least the practice of adorning walls with objects of idolatry (if not the objects themselves) was borrowed from Egypt. If this is so, its inception may go all the way back to Solomon’s marriage to an Egyptian princess (1 Kings 3:1) and to his building a shrine to and worshiping her god (11:1–8), along with those of his many other foreign wives. While the public practice of this religion may have been destroyed with the reforms of Josiah (2 Kin. 22–23), the cult had apparently survived in secret.

Verse 11: The room was not empty. Ezekiel could see through the smoke of their incense seventy elders of Judah offering their abominable homage to the image-idols that

surrounded them. They were elders, not priests, but had assumed the priestly role in their religious malpractice. If the incense prepared for the temple worship of Jehovah was that which they burned unto these idols, the blasphemy was compounded. Who were these seventy and what, if any, is the significance of their number? Seventy is the number of the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin. Matthew Henry suggests this identity of the men.⁶ However, there is no reliable evidence that the Sanhedrin was formed this early.

That they were “elders” would indicate men of leadership, men who were respected. Seventy (the symbol of perfection or completeness times 10) may be intended to stand for the completeness of the corruption of God’s people. (If the leaders were so thoroughly corrupt, little wonder that the people were!) Such, of course, would be an understandable hyperbole. In actuality, it will soon be revealed that there were still a few in Jerusalem who grieved over such abominations (9:4). Ezekiel recognized one of the elders—Jaazaniah, the son of Shaphan. If this Shaphan is the same as the one who assisted Josiah in the overthrow of idolatry (2 Kin. 22:3), we see the rebellion in the son against all that his father stood for, a sad circumstance still often repeated.

Verses 12–13: God made sure the young prophet had taken in fully the scene before him by asking if he had seen what the elders were doing. They were doing these things “in the dark,” that is, in secrecy. The Lord said that they were representative of what every man was doing in his own “chamber of imagery,” thus indicating that the nation as a whole had gone after idols. They had convinced themselves that Jehovah did not see them since they practiced their abominations behind closed doors of secret chambers. Besides, they reasoned, how could He see or care since He had forsaken them and given them into the hands of their enemies? Since He would no longer protect them, they sought protection from other gods. This self-deception amounted to blaming God for their abominable practices. Once more, the Lord warned Ezekiel that these horrible and shocking scenes were but the prelude to others that he would soon be shown.

The Women at the Temple Gate (14–15)

Verse 14: Now Ezekiel is brought to the gate of the temple itself where he sees women weeping (once more, the north is mentioned). We could wish that they were mourning because of the abominations being practiced by their husbands and by all Judah, but not so. While the seventy men (vv. 10–12) were secretly worshiping their idols, these women were openly and publicly mourning for Tammuz, presumably their favorite pagan deity. Tammuz, mentioned only here in the Bible, is generally conceded to be the Babylonian name of a mythical character identifiable with the Greek god, Adonis. His cultus was connected with the cycles of nature in

which vegetation dies in the fall and winter and then is revived in the spring. Tammuz' death supposedly coincided with or caused the decline of vegetation and his alleged revival produced or coincided with the renewal of life in nature. His death was observed with excessive mourning and weeping, as described here. His revival is said to have been observed with equally excessive jubilation involving unbridled orgies. If the mourning part of the ritual took place at the entrance to the temple we may suppose that the wicked jublations did also. At least as early as the time of Josiah and Jeremiah, the women of Judah had begun to lend their support to idolatry (2 Kin. 23:7; Jer. 7:18).

Verse 15: By this time Ezekiel must have been almost staggering from the shock of the atrocities he had observed, but the Lord warns him that he will soon see even greater abominations. So the Lord leads Him even nearer the temple.

The Sun-Worshippers—The Worst Abomination of All (16–18)

Verse 16: Now, at the very door of the holy place, between the altar of burnt offerings and the temple porch, Ezekiel saw twenty-five men engaged in worship. This was an area so sacred that apparently only the priests were allowed to enter it (Joel 2:17), thus it is likely that these were priests. As the seventy (v. 11) seemed to be representative of all of Judah in general, perhaps these twenty-five are representative of all of the priesthood specifically. But why twenty-five? David had divided the priesthood into twenty-four courses (1 Chr. 24:1–18), thus each of these courses could have been represented by one of these men, and the twenty-fifth may have been the high priest.

Rather than conducting the sacred rites of the worship of Jehovah, they desecrated this holy ground by worshiping the sun! The temple faced the East, so these twenty-five had their backs to it as they adored the sun. Worse still is the following: The mercy seat (where the Lord made His presence known to Israel [Lev. 16:2]) was in the rear of the temple, which was the extreme west end of the edifice (Exo. 26:22). This meant that in turning to the East to worship the sun, these priests had turned their backs to Jehovah, not only symbolically, but also physically. Note that worship of any heavenly body was expressly forbidden in the law (Deu. 17:3).

Why was this scene a greater abomination than its predecessors (vv. 6, 13, 15)? Perhaps its proximity to the holy place itself and the involvement of the priesthood make it so. The fact that Ezekiel was himself a priest who was utterly loyal to Jehovah (Eze. 1:3) would make the corruption of the priesthood in his beloved home city particularly odious and shocking.

Verse 17: While the Lord knew that Ezekiel had physically observed the odious practices to which he had been exposed, He wanted the prophet-priest to contemplate the awful

implications of them. God is preparing to announce to Ezekiel that He must utterly destroy these wicked apostates **because of the very practices he has seen**—all of this is not “a light thing!” The gross idolatries of the people had rendered them totally insensitive to God’s Law, which promoted justice, kindness, and cordial human relationships. Thus, the land was filled with the violence that naturally follows men who neither revere God nor respect men (“the land is full of blood, and the city full of wresting of judgment,” 9:9; cf. 11:6).

God said these people had “turned again” to provoke His anger. Righteous Josiah’s radical reforms of a few years earlier virtually obliterated the leaders, the places, and the public practice of idolatry (2 Kin. 23:4–20). While he drove these abominations from the land, he was not able to drive them from the hearts of the people. They had thus “turned again” to those contemptible devices. The specific meaning of *put the branch to their nose* is obscure to us (although it certainly was not to Ezekiel and his generation). It was most likely an idolatrous gesture of some sort that further signified utter defiance, pride, and irreverence toward the true and living God. They had no shame!

Verse 18: This verse is a verbal bridge to the opening of chapter 9, expressing the absolute exhaustion of God’s mercy and longsuffering and explaining why God must deal with His people as He will immediately reveal.

The Vision of God’s Judgment Upon Jerusalem (9:1–11)

God Summons His Judgment Squad (1–2)

Verse 1: The threat introduced in 8:18 will now be executed. Ezekiel hears the terrible voice of Almighty God calling the watchmen of the city to draw near. The commission they were to fulfill is implied by the fact that each was to come equipped with his weapon of destruction or slaughter in hand.⁷ Ironically, the very ones who normally stood watch as protectors would now be given the work of destroyers.

Verse 2: Although the seven persons who responded are called “men,” they were obviously heavenly rather than earthly beings (cf. Gen. 19:1). Note that they came from the north, the direction from which God would bring the Babylonian hordes to render judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. Now we learn that only six came with weapons, while the seventh was distinguished from them by his linen clothing and by his equipment with a scribe’s inkhorn rather than a battle axe. As we shall shortly see, the one linen-clad scribe will be God’s messenger of mercy amidst the carnage that will soon be visited on the wicked city. The purpose of the inkhorn will soon be revealed. Both from the description here and from the subsequent charges given him (vv. 3–4, 11; 10:2, 6–7), this one had authority over the others. These all came and stood by the brazen altar, awaiting further orders.

God Spares the Innocent and Destroys the Guilty (3–8)

Verse 3–4: Ezekiel now sees the Lord (“the glory of the God of Israel”) rising from the chariot-throne surrounded by the cherubim (cf. 1:5–28; 8:4) to occupy the threshold of His house, from which He will issue His orders to the seven destroyers. Before giving the commission to destroy, God addresses the scribe-leader, and it becomes evident why he is equipped with an inkhorn. He is charged to go through the city and mark the foreheads of those few who are sad and ashamed because of the corruption of the vast majority. Righteous Jeremiah, Baruch, and a handful of others who were still residents of Jerusalem at the time, must have come to the mind of Ezekiel as he heard these orders. The six will soon be told the purpose of the mark.

Verses 5–7: The six were to follow the scribe through the city, slaying everyone in sight without pity. They were to spare no man, whether old or young. Even little children, girls, and women, sometimes spared because they cannot defend themselves, were to be smitten without mercy. The only exceptions to be made were those who had been marked by the scribe; to these alone God would extend mercy (cf. Rev. 7:2–3). Moreover, they were commanded to begin their bloody work at the temple, perhaps because it (as this series of visions implies) had become the fountain of all the corruption. After ordering the defiling of the temple by the slaughter of its idolatrous occupants, the death angels then went through the city continuing their godly mission. In spite of all of the abominations God had shown him, thus logically convincing him that his corrupt countrymen deserved the severest Divine retribution, the sight of the actual slaughter proves too much for Ezekiel. His emotions get the better of him. “His human, national sympathies led him, as they led Moses (Num. 11:2; 14:19) and...Paul (Rom. 10:1–3) to undertake the work of intercession.”⁸ Forgetting momentarily that the innocent were to be marked for preservation, or (perhaps more likely), remembering that Jeremiah had recently written that not one righteous man could be found in Jerusalem (Jer. 5:1), Ezekiel asks God if He would not preserve any of Israel in His judgment upon Jerusalem. He seems to be asking God to spare some of the wicked if necessary, in order to preserve some residue.

God’s Restatement of the Justice of His Fierce Wrath (9–11)

Verse 9: In response to Ezekiel’s plea for the sparing of a remnant, God reminds him of the enormity of the wickedness of both Israel and Judah—it was “exceeding great,” filling the land with innocent blood and perverted judgments (cf. 8:17). The philosophy that had produced these evils was “Jehovah hath forsaken the land, and Jehovah seeth not.” This is but a repetition of the mantra of the seventy idolatrous elders in their secret chamber (8:12) and may indicate that it was a commonly expressed sentiment. The people were so warped in their

idolatrous mentality that they could only conceive of Jehovah in terms of a powerless local deity who had abandoned them. Their statement first denied His omnipresence (“Jehovah hath forsaken the land”) and then His omniscience (“Jehovah seeth [knoweth] not”). How could they be accountable to an absent and ignorant god? Consequently, they could behave as they pleased with impunity!

Verse 10: God’s answer to the prophet’s plea for mercy is unequivocal: He will not spare nor have pity on the guilty. Ezekiel comes dangerously near blaming God for the exercise of His faultless wrath against these impudent and rebellious people. This is borne out in God’s reminder that their wickedness (rather than His arbitrary or malignant will) has brought judgment upon them; they are merely reaping what they have sowed.

Verse 11: All the while Ezekiel has been importuning God for his people and God has been replying, the seven angels have been about their work. Now, the linen-clad scribe returns to report that he has fulfilled his commission. Jim McGuiggan avers: “This is to remind us that in the midst of judgment mercy isn’t forgotten!”⁹ Keil suggests: “He does this, not in his own name only, but in that of all the rest.”¹⁰

Jerusalem Burned and Jehovah Deserts the Temple (10:1–22)

The Burning of Jerusalem (1–8)

Verse 1: The four cherubim (initially called “living creatures”) that formed the chariot-throne of Jehovah were a principal part of Ezekiel’s first vision in the plain of Chebar (1:5–26). Their presence is implied in the beginning scenes of his second vision (8:2–4). Now, in chapter 10, they are seen in almost every verse. He had also earlier seen a firmament above the cherubim and beneath the throne (1:22, 26). The Lord, in the likeness of a glorious man, was seen on the throne in 1:26–27 and 8:2, but here (10:1) His presence is taken for granted due to the earlier descriptions. In John’s vision into the portals of Heaven he saw the same heavenly beings, nearer God’s throne than any others, and perpetually praising God (Rev. 5:6–9).

Verse 2: The Lord addressed the scribe who is introduced and commissioned in 9:2–4. Earlier his task was one of mercy—to mark the foreheads of the righteous so that they would be spared from the six destroying angels. Now his task will be one of destruction. He is to take a double handful of coals (not just a few, but many) from the cherub and scatter them over Jerusalem. Since these four cherubim constituted a single chariot upon which the throne of the Lord was situated, they may here be referred to as a singular cherub, or this may be an allusion to a particular one of the four. Coals of fire were sometimes used for purification and purging (Isa. 6:5–7); here they are used to symbolize punishment and destruction that will soon be brought upon the city. The scribe stepped up to the cherub to receive the coals.

Verses 3–5: These verses merely give more details of the material presented in verses 1–2. The cherubim stood on the right (south) side of the temple. As the scribe came to the cherubim, a cloud (representing the presence of God, I Kin. 8:10–11; Isa. 6:1–2) billowed up, spread throughout the court, and filled both it and the temple. The brightness of God’s glory shone above and through it all. This spectacular sight was accompanied by the awesome sound—compared to the terrible voice of God Almighty—of the rustling of the cherubic wings.

Verses 6–8: One of the cherubim is now commanded to hand some coals of fire to the scribe. He does so and the scribe goes forth to execute his commission of destruction upon the city. Verse 8 explains that the cherubim not only had wings, but man-like hands under their wings, further confirming that these were the same heavenly creatures Ezekiel saw in his opening vision (cf. 1:8). The destruction of Jerusalem has now been depicted under the figures of both sword (chapter 9) and fire. Its doom is certain and its destruction will be complete!

Jehovah’s Departure From the Temple (9–22)

Verses 9–17: The balance of this chapter relates to the Lord’s desertion of the temple. The fact that the cherubim (by means of the Lord’s chariot-throne which they constituted) are the means by which He departs, likely explains why they are given such great prominence in the remainder of this chapter. The vision is so remarkable that, as in chapter 1, Ezekiel seems to almost struggle to describe what is being revealed to his finite mind.

With only minor variations the description of the cherubim here is identical with that in 1:5–21, which see for supplemental notes on the following verses. While the cherubim had their respective wheels, they all moved as one in the direction that the head (i.e., the front wheel which originated the motion)¹¹ beckoned them (cf. v. 17). While the eyes are said to be on the wheels in 1:18, here they are said to be all over the cherubim as well (v. 12). However, this is not a contradiction, but merely amplification. Verse 13 seems to indicate that Ezekiel heard the **naming** of the wheels (with which there is nothing comparable in chapter 1). Several commentators indicate that this is an unfortunate rendering. Given the fact that the cherubim immediately begin their movement (vv. 15ff.), Keil’s contention makes sense. He avers that the wheels were not **named**, but **commanded** to do their work, that is, to whirl, to turn, to roll as a chariot.¹²

That verse 14 mentions the face of a cherub instead of that of an ox (as in 1:10) poses a difficulty. (It is unarguable that Ezekiel intends for us to understand that the cherubim and their faces are the same in both passages [cf. 10:15, 22].) Likely the explanation lies in the fact that the correct rendering of verse 14 has the definite article before the singular “cherub” (i.e., “the cherub” [ASV] rather than “a cherub” [KJV]). The remaining face descriptions in verse 14

("man," "lion," "eagle") are all without the article. The suggestion of Plumptre and Whitelaw makes the most sense:

It is as though, in this second vision, he recognizes that this was emphatically **the** cherubic form. Possibly the article indicates that this was the form that had given the "coals of fire" in verse. 7. Each form, we must remember, had the four faces, but the prophet names the face which each presented to him as he gazed.¹³

Verse 15 tells us that the cherubim "mounted up"—they arose and began to move; their wheels began to turn. The four are so much a unit they are described as one "living creature" (cf. comments on v. 2). Verses 16–17 repeat the description of the way the cherubim and their wheels move in perfect harmony.

Verses 18–19: As the cherubim throne-chariot begins to move, so does the "glory of Jehovah," that is, the Lord Himself. He moved from the threshold (where he had been since 9:3), from whence He had issued all of His judgments against Jerusalem, to take up His throne above the cherubim. They bore Him away from the ungrateful and unworthy nation on their heavenly wheels and wings. "[He] ascended that stately chariot, as the judge, when he comes off the bench, goes into his coach and is gone."¹⁴ He would not return till Judah had learned her lesson in the harsh school of crushing defeat, suffering, and captivity and had built Him a new house uncorrupted by the apostasy and idolatry of the old. This is one of the unspeakably sad scenes of history in which the ingratitude, selfishness, and stupidity of men is demonstrated to such a degree that the perfect longsuffering of God can no longer tolerate His own. Six centuries later, the Son of God signaled a repetition of this scene concerning the Jews and the temple of His day with awful words of doom and judgment that would seal the fate of Judaism forever in the mind of Deity: "Behold your house is left unto you desolate" (Mat. 23:38). We can only imagine the awful depression all of these scenes brought upon Ezekiel.

Verses 20–22: These verses are intended to provide further assurance that the cherubim of the first vision (1:5–21) are the same as these. While the Lord's appearance upon their chariot-throne (in the former) implied His desertion of the holy of holies, the information given in this second vision states the fact clearly. While we may not be (and do not have to be) certain of the meaning of every detail of the material in this chapter, the intended message to Ezekiel (and to all readers) is clear: God has departed the temple in Jerusalem and the time of her fiery judgment has come!

Evil Rulers To Be Punished—A Remnant To Be Preserved and Restored (11:1–25) ***The False Counsel of Judah's Leaders (1:1–4)***

Verse 1: The Spirit now carried Ezekiel to the east gate of the temple court where he has just seen the Glory of the Lord depart on His chariot-throne (10:18–19). The prophet sees

twenty-five men as he had earlier between the temple porch and the altar (8:16). While those apparently represented the corrupt priesthood, these comprise a different group and apparently represent the princes or rulers (two of them are explicitly identified as such). “The number is, no doubt, symbolical, made up, probably, of twenty-four men and the king. The number twenty-four points to the tribes of undivided Israel.”¹⁵ Ezekiel has now been shown the seventy idolatrous elders (8:12), the twenty-five corrupt priests (v. 16), and the twenty-five wicked princes. How better could a picture of utter, absolute, and complete apostasy have been painted than in these representative groups? The rebellion of Israel and Judah fully justified the outpouring of God’s wrath upon the city and nation. Two of the men, Jaazaniah, son of Azzur (not the same as the one in 8:11), and Pelatiah, son of Benaiah, are called “princes.” Nothing more is known of these men than what Ezekiel states here.

Verses 2–3: The legacy of Jaazaniah and Pelatiah (v. 1) is a sorry one indeed—false counsel that contradicts the message of God. The Lord God Himself labeled them as schemers of iniquity and givers of wicked counsel.

Specifically, they were telling the people that it was not the time to build houses. They likened Jerusalem to a cooking pot and themselves to the flesh therein. All of the commentators label this as a difficult passage, mainly due to the Hebrew construction. However, the general sense of what they were saying almost certainly relates to and is a contradiction of Jeremiah’s message of complete doom for the city at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. False prophets (such as Hananiah) promised that God would destroy Nebuchadnezzar and after only two years all of the exiles would be able to return to Jerusalem (Jer. 28:1–4). Jeremiah refuted this lie and wrote to the exiles already in Babylon that they should not be deceived by unfounded promises of a speedy return. Rather, they should go ahead and build houses and plant gardens because their stay was going to be lengthy—specifically, seventy years (Jer. 29:1–10; cf. 25:4–11). Jaazaniah and Pelatiah apparently taught the same lie as Hananiah about a speedy end to any threat from Nebuchadnezzar, thus advising that there was no cause for the exiles to build houses as Jeremiah had commanded. These false prophets likened the walls of Jerusalem to the sides and bottom of a cooking pot that would protect the flesh inside (representing themselves) from the immediate destruction of the flame (Nebuchadnezzar’s hordes) (cf. vv. 7, 11).

Verse 4: All such preaching was contrary to what God had revealed through His true prophets. It demonstrated contempt for God, confirmed the people in their sins, and instilled false hopes. Therefore, Ezekiel was mandated by God to expose these false prophets and their lies.

God's Message of Doom Upon Israel (5–13)

Verses 5–7a: The Spirit that had caused Ezekiel to see this remarkable and tragic vision that began in chapter 8 now commands him to speak. He will do so in the name and by the authority of Jehovah as he addresses God's covenant people. (The prophet unabashedly claims inspiration of the Holy Spirit as the source of his message.) He is to speak to "the house of Israel." The remainder of the former separate Kingdom of Israel who survived the ravages of being besieged and totally vanquished by the Assyrians over a century before were in the same area as the Judean exiles. Their political reasons for remaining a separate people no longer existed and their common predicament fostered reunification.

[The message of Ezekiel was addressed to]...the weary exiles of both Israel and Judah. In God's commission to Ezekiel, he is sent "...to the children of Israel, to **nations** (emp. DM) that are rebellious..." (2:3). To whom could "nations" refer but to both Judah and Israel under the revived name, "Israel," thus embracing all of the remnant of Jacob's descendants? Relevant to this reunion theme in Ezekiel's message is the fact that "Judah" is mentioned only 15 times, while "Israel" is addressed or referred to some 177 times by the prophet. Surely, we are not to conclude that this displaced prophet of Judah is primarily addressing the former ten-tribe nation of Israel in the exile by his constant reference to "Israel." Rather, we are to understand the use of *Israel* by Ezekiel to be directed toward the strangers and pilgrims of both Jacobean nations. Indeed, the explicit prophecy of the reunification of the formerly separate states was graphically reinforced by the figure of taking two sticks and placing them together in one hand (37:15–22).¹⁶

Ezekiel first tells Israel that the Lord has heard what they have said and He knows what they are thinking. They have said the city is a caldron and they are the flesh therein (11:3). Very well, but not in the sense they had meant and spoken it! The city was a caldron of flesh all right—a pot full of the flesh of the victims of their violent and murderous behavior, rather than a protective refuge for their filthy selves.

Verse 7b–8: Those who survive the criminal and cruel bloodshed at the hands of their fellow-citizens within the city will be brought out of it. This promise is a reference to the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the taking of the last contingency of captives into Babylonian exile (cf. v. 9). They had a fear of the sword, and that which they greatly feared was to come upon them (Job. 3:25). Once more Ezekiel prophesies the final, fatal strike by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar.

Verses 9–10: Those who survived the indescribable ordeal of the last siege and leveling of Jerusalem (see 2 Kin. 25:1–3, 8–17; Jer. 52:4–6, 12–23) would be carried into captivity (cf. v. 7b). God would use the Chaldeans to execute judgment upon the city by means of the bloodthirsty sword of war, which they feared (cf. v. 8). God promised to judge them in Israel's border. This is likely best understood as a prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar's judgment against Zedekiah, the Chaldean monarch's titular king, at Riblah in Hamath (the northern border of

Israel, 2 Kin. 14:25). When the Babylonians interrupted Zedekiah's flight from Jerusalem, they brought him before Nebuchadnezzar for judgment at Hamath. The last thing Zedekiah saw was the execution of his sons, after which his eyes were put out and he was taken to Babylon in chains where he was imprisoned till he died (Jer. 52:8–11). In passing such summary judgment upon Zedekiah, judgment was representatively passed on all of Judah that remained.

Verse 11: Ezekiel again denies their claim (v. 3) that the city would be their "caldron" of protection (see comments on v. 7a). He promises that not all will be victimized by the civil chaos and bloodshed within the city (though in consideration of that which awaits the survivors, this might be a preferable fate). Perhaps for emphasis' sake he once more tells them they will be judged in the border of the land (cf. v. 10).

Verse 12: These judgments against Judah were punitive (8:17–18), but they were also for the purpose of proving to these apostates that there is only one true and living God: "And ye shall know that I am Jehovah." The descent of Israel and Judah into idolatry was complete. Their abandonment of the knowledge and service of God brought destruction and captivity upon them. As earlier indicated, a major purpose of at least the first half of the book of Ezekiel is to demonstrate to the exiles that the tragedies which befell them were just retribution from the very God they had abandoned. However, a coordinate theme throughout the entire book is the purpose of reinstilling the knowledge and fear of God in their hearts in place of the idolatry to which they had been enslaved. The phrase, "Ye [or they] shall know that I am Jehovah," occurs sixty-three times in the book, only three of which refer to Gentile nations. The other sixty occurrences all refer to Israel and her need to acknowledge the true and living God Who had chosen them as His people. God gives two reasons for the execution of His judgment upon Israel: (1) They had not walked in His statutes nor executed His ordinances. (2) They adopted the ordinances of the Gentiles, particularly those of the pagan religions.

Verse 13: Pelatiah, one of the princely leaders in idolatry (see comments on v. 1), drops dead as Ezekiel prophesies. It is made to appear almost as though the very words of Truth spoken by the prophet slew the wicked prince. This sudden and unexpected death provokes the prophet to fear that none of Israel will be spared for a seed, so he falls upon his face and loudly expresses his concern to Jehovah (cf. 9:8). The following section is the Lord's reply to Ezekiel's prayer.

God's Answer to Ezekiel and His Promise to the Exiles (14–21)

Verses 14–15: First, God identifies for Ezekiel "the house of Israel." He first says they are "thy brethren." Specifically, "even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred." "Kindred" is actually the word that refers to one's next of kin who has the right and responsibility to redeem or

avenge on his or her behalf (Lev. 25:25–55; Ruth 2:20–4:4; Jer. 32:7–8). The word therefore refers to his nearest kin, but, as we shall see, not necessarily blood relations. Apparently the remaining inhabitants of doomed Jerusalem had said to those who had already been taken to Babylon, “Get you far from Jehovah; unto us is this land given for a possession.” Here the self-righteousness of the Jews in Jerusalem is evident. They assumed that the exiles were taken into captivity because of God’s sore displeasure with them. Thus He chased them into a God-forsaken land. On the other hand, they reasoned that He left them in Jerusalem because He was pleased with them. Therefore, God was going to cause them to continue to possess their land. Consequently, Ezekiel’s “kindred” are those with whom he has the common bond of captivity. To these he is now to address God’s message.

Verses 16–17: First, Ezekiel is to tell the exiles not to despair. While He has dispersed them among far-flung nations, still He has not forgotten them. He would abandon the soon-to-be-leveled temple of the wicked, self-righteous Jews in Jerusalem (He has already done so in Ezekiel’s vision [10:18–19]). Instead of dwelling there, He will make the exiles His sanctuary for the “little while” they are in captivity (and until a new temple is erected).

Second, Ezekiel is to promise the exiles that they will be returned to their beloved homeland. This, as we know from Jeremiah’s prophecy, was to be after the completion of seventy years of captivity (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). This directly answers Ezekiel’s plaintive cry concerning the sparing of a remnant of Israel (Ezek. 11:13; cf. 9:8).

Verses 18–20: When the exiles are returned they will destroy all vestiges of the idols and the abominations connected with them that remained from the days of their forefathers. God will give them one heart when they return, but not miraculously or in spite of their own wills. He would rather forge this new heart in them through the humbling experiences of their captivity and through such preaching as that of Ezekiel. The “one heart” may be a reference to the reunification of all of the descendants of Jacob into one nation (cf. 37:15–22). Perhaps more agreeable with the immediate context however, is a reference to the absence of idolatry among them. They would no longer have the divided allegiances fostered by believing in and serving many gods. They would with one heart devote themselves to the true and living God. Jeremiah uttered a remarkably similar prophecy in which the “one heart” apparently refers to the cessation of idolatry:

Behold, I will gather them out of all the countries, whither I have driven them in mine anger, and in my wrath, and in great indignation; and I will bring them again unto this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them (Jer. 32:37–39).

Although numerous sins can be laid at the feet of Israel after her return from captivity, she never again lapsed into idolatry.

With the new heart a new spirit will be given—a disposition of unselfish, humble service to God and men. The new heart will replace the heart hardened by idolatry, selfishness, wickedness, and corruption that the Word of God could not penetrate—the heart of adamant stone (Zec. 7:12; cf. Mat. 13:19). God had earlier described His people as “impudent and stiff-hearted” (Eze. 2:4) and “of a hard forehead and of a stiff heart” (3:7). This stone-cold heart will be replaced with a fleshly heart, but fleshly in the sense of being tender and sensitive—responsive to God and His Word—rather than carnal or unspiritual. Such a tender heart will cause them to obey Him, the only means by which any people can belong to God and God to them. There may be a prophetic hint here of the heart that would be common to God’s people in the age of the true Israel, the church, when God would give a new covenant to His people (Jer. 31:31–34).

Verse 21: Not all who returned from exile would be of one tender heart and spirit. Some would continue to walk in their own willful ways, which would be abominable to God. Their behavior would be tantamount to signing their own death sentence. God would bring deserved retribution upon them as he had their perverse forefathers. This verse is positive proof that God did not miraculously or irresistibly give any of them a new heart or spirit.

The Lord Departs Jerusalem and the Vision Closes (22–25)

Verses 22–23: Jehovah had already departed from the temple and its environs where all of the scenes of this vision (chapters 8–11) took place. Now the marvelous heavenly chariot-throne, moved by the wings and the wheels of the cherubim, bear Him up and away from the city itself. He alights to stand upon the Mount of Olives, eastward from Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley. To look westward upon the city He had chosen for His earthly seat—but had now had to desert and devote to destruction—must have been heartbreaking to the Lord beyond our comprehension. Six centuries later the Incarnate Word would retire to the same spot after pronouncing the woes upon the Jewish leaders and weeping over the temple from which they had once more driven the Presence of Jehovah by their sins (Mat. 23:1–39). From this spot the Lord Jesus iterated the second destruction of the city and the leveling of the temple. This time there would be no temple rebuilt and the Jews as a nation would forever cease to be His people.

Verses 24–25: In the same way Ezekiel had been transported from Chaldea to Jerusalem (8:3) he is now taken back among the exiles in Chaldea—by the Spirit of God. The vision thus abruptly came to a close. But he did not see the vision merely for his own edification.

If the elders of Judah were in the prophet's house (8:1) in hope of hearing some word of the Lord from him, they certainly were not disappointed! God specifically commanded him to deliver the message contained in 11:16–21 to his “kindred” in the exile. However, the commission Ezekiel received from God was to declare what was revealed to him by God to the exiles (2:4–5). He was carrying out his God-given commission when He related all of the scenes of this magnificent vision to the people.

Applications

Since “...whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning (Rom. 15:4), we would expect to recognize some practical principles from this vision that are applicable to moderns. Consider the following:

Chapter 8:

Verses 3, 5: Both God and His Son are jealous and will tolerate no rivals.

Verses 7–16: When the leaders of a nation are corrupt there is little hope for the nation.

Verse 14: The depth of corruption in Judah can be seen in the corruption of its women. Women are generally the last bastion of moral and religious purity. When they are corrupted, the corruption is entire.

Verse 16: Often those entrusted with preservation of and leadership in true religion are the very ones who betray their trust.

Verse 17: Violence abounds when men forget God.

Verse 18: The longsuffering of God is not without limit.

Chapter 9:

Verse 2: God tempers His wrath with mercy.

Verse 4: God is pleased when we mourn over evil and error.

Verse 10: God does not arbitrarily judge men, but simply holds them accountable for their sins and renders retribution accordingly.

Chapter 10:

Verse 2: Faithfulness to God requires us to declare both His justice and His mercy.

Verses 18–19: God will not abide with those who despise Him.

Chapter 11:

Verse 4: God's faithful preachers will always expose false teachers and their lies.

Verse 5: We have authority to speak only when we have a “Thus saith Jehovah.”

Verse 12: There never has been and never will be any means of demonstrating faith in, loyalty to, and love for God apart from obedience to His Divine Law (cf. v. 20; John 14:15, 21, 24; I John 2:3–6; 5:3; II John 9; et al.).

Verse 19: God wants His people to have one heart and spirit that strives to do only what He commands and all that He commands.

Verse 25: God’s servants have an obligation to speak to others the things we have learned from God.

Conclusion

The reader needs to remember that the things Ezekiel recorded in these chapters were not literal occurrences (e.g., the destruction of Jerusalem by six angels with battle axes or by one angel who scattered coals of fire over the city). He was brought by the Spirit “in the visions of God [not bodily, DM] to Jerusalem” (8:3). As is common to all apocalyptic literature (e.g., The Revelation), the scenes of this vision are graphic symbolic representations of things that were true: (1) Judah was incurably—and all but completely—corrupt in her idolatry. (2) The temple itself was defiled so that God could no longer abide there. (3) He was therefore going to bring utter destruction upon Jerusalem. (4) Yet there would be a remnant left (the exiles) who would eventually be brought back to their homeland.

There are many things in the book of Ezekiel that expositors have puzzled over through the centuries and will continue to wonder about. At least some of the scenes and descriptions in the visions of chapters 8–11 are no exception. Accordingly, Adam Clarke remarked as follows:

And perhaps from the whole of this vision and its difficulties, he [the reader, DM] will see the propriety of the council of rabbins ordering Rabbi Ananias **three hundred** barrels of oil to light his lamp during the time it would be necessary for him to employ in explaining this one vision.¹⁷

Endnotes

1. Dub McClish, “Ezekiel: the Prophet of the Exile,” in *Living Lessons from the Prophets*, ed. John Waddey (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions, 1985), p. 197.
2. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
3. Since the word *spirit* is not capitalized in the MSS, it is subject to interpretation by the translators. The KJV renders it as “spirit,” which some take as a reference to the wind (e.g., C. F. Keil, *Ezekiel, Daniel in Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978 rep.], 9:115). The ASV translators capitalize “Spirit,” thus making the term refer to the Holy Spirit, which I believe fits far better with the context. The setting is the presence and activity of Deity. To provide the remarkable visions Ezekiel saw required the work of the Supernatural (the Holy Spirit). Such could hardly be done by the wind.
4. F.C. Cook, *Barnes’ Notes: The Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983 rep.), 5:322.
5. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* (Hew York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), 4:793.
6. Henry, p. 794.
7. ASV margin has “battle axe” as an alternate reading for “slaughter weapon” in 9:2.
8. E.H. Plumptre and T. Whitelaw, *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D.M. Spence (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), 12:163.
9. Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of Ezekiel* (Lubbock, TX: Montex Pub Co., 1984 rep.), p. 98.
10. Keil, 9:133.

11. Keil, 9:139.
12. Keil, 9:140
13. Plumptre and Whitelaw, 12:178.
14. Henry, 4:805.
15. Cook, 5:328.
16. McClish, p. 202.
17. Adam Clarke, "Ezekiel" in *Clarke's Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, n.d. rep.), 4:448.

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