

**DIVINE PUNISHMENT FOR
JUDAH'S INFIDELITY
EZEKIEL 15:1 - 24:27**

¹The word of YHWH came to me:

²Son of man, what is going to happen to the wood of the vine — the vine branch that is in among the trees of the forest?

³Is wood taken from it to make anything? Does one take a peg from it on which to hang any object? ⁴It is put in the fire for fuel.

When the fire has consumed its two ends and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything?

⁵When it was whole it was used for nothing; how much less – when the fire has consumed it, and it is charred – can it ever be used for anything!

⁶Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have consigned to the fire for fuel, so I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ⁷I will set my face against them; although they escape from the fire, the fire shall still consume them; and you shall know that I am YHWH, when I set my face against them.

⁸And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, says the Lord YHWH.

In verses 2-5 we have a parable: an unexpected use of images that provokes questions, and in this way can lead to a variety of insights. The central image of a vine would be expected to have people thinking of the special place of Israel in God's design. It is the vine, after all, that helped make Canaan attractive (see Numbers 13:23). Because of the grapes it bears, the vine is in a class of its own (see the clever comparison with the thorn bush in Judges 9:12-13). The vine has pride of place among the blessings that belong to the Messianic age (see Genesis 49:11). We might consider Isaiah 5, the Song of Solomon 7:13 and 8:11-12, and especially Psalm 80.

The first surprise of the parable here in Ezekiel is that this vine is not in a vineyard, but is in a forest surrounded by other trees. The second surprise is that harvesting grapes is not the issue. The focus is on the wood of the vine.

Verse 3 states that it is useless. You can't do anything with it. You can't even make a peg. Yes, it is good for one thing: as fuel for a fire.

In verse 4 we see the vine thrown into the fire and partly burned. If it was useless before it is even more useless now - except to be thrown back into the fire and totally consumed.

In verses 6-8 we find one application of the parable. The vine surrounded by the other trees, is Jerusalem surrounded by the other nations. It is caught up in the conflagration that swept through the area in 598BC with the advance of the Babylonian army. It was this conflagration that issued in the exile of King Jeconiah, Ezekiel himself, and the other exiles whom he is addressing. Yes, some did 'escape from the fire', but 'the fire shall still consume them'(verse 7). Once again Ezekiel is warning that there is worse to come – a warning that was realised in 587 when Jerusalem was razed to the ground.

It is YHWH who will see that this punishment is realised, and all because 'they have acted faithlessly'(verse 8).

In 16:1-34 Ezekiel is told to speak words of reproach against Jerusalem from YHWH. This is followed by a declaration of judgment in 16:35-43. Instead of an abstract listing of 'abominations' we have an historical narrative. As in Hosea (see 9:10; 13:5-6) and Jeremiah (see 2:1ff), Ezekiel goes back to the beginning of the relationship: a time of intimate love; and only in this setting does he speak of sin.

Before it became the capital of the united kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Jerusalem was a Canaanite city. Its inhabitants, the Jebusites, were associated with the west Semitic people, the Amorites (see Joshua 10:6) and the Hittites, who were originally in Anatolia and spread from there into Syria and Canaan (see Genesis 23:3ff; 27:46). The Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites and Jebusites are listed among the people cleared from the land by YHWH in order to make room for Israel (see Deuteronomy 7:1; Joshua 3:10; 24:11). The land 'vomited them out' (Leviticus 18:25).

Ezekiel presents Jerusalem as a neglected, unwanted, abandoned child, till YHWH took notice of her. In words that echo the words of creation in the Book of Genesis, YHWH's word called her to 'live and grow' (verses 6-7). One could add: 'and so it happened!' It was God's merciful intervention that saved the city and watched over it as it grew (verse 7).

Then YHWH chose Jerusalem as his own and entered into a love-covenant with her, pledging himself to her: 'you became mine' (verse 8).

¹The word of YHWH came to me:

²Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, ³and say, Thus says the Lord YHWH to Jerusalem:

Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.

⁴As to your birth: on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths. ⁵No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.

⁶I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood. As you lay in your blood, I said to you, "Live! ⁷and grow up like a plant of the field." You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your pubic hair had grown; yet you were stark naked.

⁸I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord YHWH, and you became mine.

⁹Then I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you, and anointed you with oil. ¹⁰I clothed you with embroidered cloth and with sandals of fine leather; I bound you in fine linen and covered you with rich fabric. ¹¹I adorned you with ornaments: I put bracelets on your arms, a chain on your neck, ¹²a ring on your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown upon your head. ¹³You were adorned with gold and silver, while your clothing was of fine linen, rich fabric, and embroidered cloth. You had choice flour and honey and oil for food. You grew exceedingly beautiful, fit to be a queen. ¹⁴Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of my splendour that I had bestowed on you, says the Lord YHWH.

¹⁵But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passer-by. ¹⁶You took some of your garments, and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore; nothing like this has ever been or ever shall be. ¹⁷You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and my silver that I had given you, and made for yourself male images, and with them played the whore; ¹⁸and you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. ¹⁹Also my bread that I gave you—I fed you with choice flour and oil and honey—you set it before them as a pleasing odour; and so it was, says the Lord YHWH.

Drawing on the wedding customs of his day, Ezekiel speaks of the ways in which YHWH has graced Jerusalem in terms of bridal splendour.

Everyone admired Jerusalem. It was perfect. YHWH had shared his glory with her.

One would think that Jerusalem would be filled with gratitude to YHWH who had so privileged her by lavishing his love upon her. But no! She enjoyed her beauty, forgetting the one who lavished it upon her, and took pride in her fame. Like a whore (the verb **זָנָה** occurs 12 times in chapter 16), she opened herself to anyone who lusted after what she had.

The gift lavished upon her by YHWH – the adornment already described in verse 10, she used for idolatrous cult. Continuing the metaphor of marital infidelity, Ezekiel accuses Jerusalem: ‘you made for yourself male images, and with them you played the whore’ (verse 17). The primary reference is to the alliances Jerusalem made with foreign nations. She trusted them, rather than YHWH.

We know that child sacrifice was practised during the reign of Manasseh (see 2Kings 16:3; 21:6). This appears to have been an element in the cult of Molech which was connected with the cult of the dead. It was proscribed in the Torah:

You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am YHWH.

– Leviticus 18:21

Verses 24-25 speak of the altars erected to whatever god was thought to be useful by a superstitious people who ‘did not remember the days of your youth’ (verse 22), and the graces lavished upon them by YHWH (16:6-14).

Verses 26-29 speak of Jerusalem’s alliances with Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, naming the infidelity that stands behind the metaphor of ‘playing the whore’.

A whore expects payment for giving herself to another. Jerusalem doesn’t even have this ‘benefit’, but is so desperate that she pays for others to have her.

²⁰You took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. As if your whorings were not enough! ²¹You slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering to them. ²²And in all your abominations and your whorings you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were stark naked, flailing about in your blood.

²³After all your wickedness (woe, woe to you! says the Lord YHWH), ²⁴you built yourself a platform and made yourself a lofty place in every square; ²⁵at the head of every street you built your lofty place and prostituted your beauty, offering yourself to every passer-by, and multiplying your whoring.

²⁶You played the whore with the Egyptians, your big-membered neighbours, multiplying your whoring, to provoke me to anger.

²⁷Therefore I stretched out my hand against you, reduced your rations, and gave you up to the will of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your lewd behaviour. ²⁸You played the whore with the Assyrians, because you were insatiable; you played the whore with them, and still you were not satisfied. ²⁹You multiplied your whoring with Chaldea, the land of merchants; and even with this you were not satisfied.

³⁰How sick is your heart, says the Lord YHWH, that you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen whore; ³¹building your platform at the head of every street, and making your lofty place in every square! Yet you were not like a whore, because you scorned payment. ³²Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! ³³Gifts are given to all whores; but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from all around for your whorings. ³⁴So you were different from other women in your whorings: no one solicited you to play the whore; and you gave payment, while no payment was given to you; you were different.

³⁵Therefore, O whore, hear the word of YHWH:

³⁶Thus says the Lord YHWH, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whoring with your lovers, and because of all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, ³⁷therefore, I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated; I will gather them against you from all around, and will uncover your nakedness to them, so that they may see all your nakedness.

³⁸I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring blood upon you in wrath and jealousy. ³⁹I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you stark naked.

⁴⁰They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords.

⁴¹They shall burn your houses and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; I will stop you from playing the whore, and you shall also make no more payments.

⁴²So I will satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall turn away from you; I will be calm, and will be angry no longer.

⁴³Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your head, says the Lord YHWH. Have you not committed lewdness beyond all your abominations?

YHWH's judgment of Jerusalem, and the consequent punishment would evoke profound feelings for those who had been through the siege and capture of Jerusalem in 598.

The use of the future tense reinforces the earlier threats uttered by Ezekiel - threats which were to be realised in 587 when the city and its temple were razed to the ground. In these terrible events - brought on by the infidelity of the people to the special covenant with God that they were privileged to have - they were encountering, not only the victorious army of Babylon, but also YHWH, their Lover.

The aim of the 'punishments' is declared in verse 41: 'I will stop you from playing the whore, and you shall also make no more payments'.

Once again Jerusalem is reminded of its origins: 'Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite'(verse 45; see 16:3).

Ezekiel goes on to speak of the northern kingdom of Israel, represented by the capital city, Samaria, and the renowned Sodom, covered over by the Dead Sea. These are spoken of as Jerusalem's 'sisters'. Bad as were these cities, Jerusalem is accused of being 'more corrupt than they in all your ways'(verse 47).

In Genesis 19 the sin of Sodom is its refusal to offer hospitality. This was reinforced by gross sexual abuse. These are summed up here in verse 50 under the expression 'abominable things'. The accent here, however, is on pride, economic prosperity, luxury and lack of concern for the poor. Ezekiel is calling the people of Jerusalem to reflect on their failures in this regard.

Compared to Jerusalem, both Sodom and Samaria 'appear righteous'(verse 51). Jerusalem must acknowledge its guilt and bear the consequent disgrace (already described in the metaphor of the punishment of a harlot).

⁴⁴See, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you, "Like mother, like daughter." ⁴⁵You are the daughter of your mother, who loathed her husband and her children; and you are the sister of your sisters, who loathed their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite. ⁴⁶Your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters.

⁴⁷You not only followed their ways, and acted according to their abominations; within a very little time you were more corrupt than they in all your ways.

⁴⁸As I live, says the Lord YHWH, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. ⁴⁹This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. ⁵⁰They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.

⁵¹Samaria has not committed half your sins; you have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed. ⁵²Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have brought about for your sisters a more favourable judgment; because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.

⁵³I will restore their fortunes, the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes along with theirs, ⁵⁴in order that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all that you have done, becoming a consolation to them.

⁵⁵As for your sisters, Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former state, Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former state, and you and your daughters shall return to your former state.

⁵⁶Was not your sister Sodom a byword in your mouth in the day of your pride, ⁵⁷before your wickedness was uncovered? Now you are a mockery to the daughters of Aram and all her neighbours, and to the daughters of the Philistines, those all around who despise you.

⁵⁸You must bear the penalty of your lewdness and your abominations, says YHWH.

⁵⁹Yes, thus says the Lord YHWH: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath, breaking the covenant; ⁶⁰yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. ⁶¹Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you.

⁶²I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am YHWH, ⁶³in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord YHWH.

The message of the previous verses is reinforced here: ‘You must bear the penalty of your lewdness and your abominations’(verse 58).

However, a note of reassurance and hope is injected into what is otherwise a bleak picture. YHWH promises to restore (שׁוּב) Sodom and Samaria, and Jerusalem to the state they enjoyed before their sin and its consequences. The restoration of Jerusalem will give heart to Samaria and to Sodom that they, too, will be restored. This is conditional on Jerusalem bearing her present suffering as punishment for her infidelity.

In the first part of chapter 16, YHWH spoke of the pledge he made to Jerusalem when he took her to himself as his bride and ‘entered into a covenant with you’(verse 8). He cannot pretend that Jerusalem has not broken the covenant (verse 59), but he concludes with the assurance that he will ‘remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth’(verse 60). They did not ‘remember’(verses 22, 43), but YHWH does.

He goes even further: ‘I will establish with you an everlasting covenant’(בְּרִית עוֹלָם, verse 60). It is this faithfulness of YHWH, and his willingness to forgive that will bring it about that they will remember, and be ashamed, and so change.

As with the parables of Jesus in the New Testament, it is important to allow the parable of 17:1-10 to have its effect without limiting its meaning to the allegorical interpretations which follow. The aim of a parable is precisely to bypass the logical and controlling mind in order to surprise and suggest.

The Torah likens YHWH to an eagle:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

– Exodus 19:4

As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions ...

– Deuteronomy 32:11

The cedars of Lebanon were famous. The eagle carefully removes a shoot from the highest part of the cedar and carries it to Canaan (verse 4). There is an ambiguity here. The Hebrew כנען can mean Canaan. It can also mean 'trader' (as already in 16:29 where the reference is to Babylon).

Verses 5-8 recall Psalm 80:9-11, which likens Israel to a flourishing vine planted by YHWH. Ezekiel has the vine 'turned towards the eagle' and soundly rooted where it has been planted.

Unexpectedly, a twist comes into the parable in verse 9. With no explanation we are asked to imagine the vine withering and its fruit rotting. The eagle that planted the seed now uproots the vine. It does so easily for the roots of the vine are superficial.

When read as a parable one key question emerges: why did the eagle, after so much devoted care, decide to destroy the cherished vine? This is the same question asked in Psalm 80:12-13.

¹The word of YHWH came to me:

²Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel.

³Say: Thus says the Lord YHWH:

A great eagle, with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colours, came to the Lebanon.

He took the top of the cedar,

⁴broke off its topmost shoot; He carried it to the land of Canaan, set it in a city of merchants.

⁵Then he took a seed from the land,

placed it in fertile soil; A plant by abundant waters, he set it like a willow twig.

⁶It sprouted and became a vine spreading out, but low; Its branches turned toward him, its roots remained where it stood.

So it became a vine; it brought forth branches, put forth foliage.

⁷There was this one great eagle, with great wings and much plumage. And see!

This vine twined its roots about him; it shot out its branches toward him, so that he might water it, from the bed where it was planted.

⁸It was planted in good soil by abundant waters, so that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine.

⁹Say: Thus says the Lord YHWH:

Will it prosper? Will he not pull up its roots, cause its fruit to rot and wither, its fresh sprouting leaves to fade?

No strong arm or mighty army will be needed to pull it from its roots. ¹⁰Although it is planted, will it thrive? When the east wind strikes it, will it not utterly wither, wither on the bed where it grew?

¹¹Then the word of YHWH came to me: ¹²Say now to the rebellious house: Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them: The king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took its king and its officials, and brought them back with him to Babylon.

¹³He took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath (he had taken away the chief men of the land), ¹⁴so that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and that by keeping his covenant it might stand. ¹⁵But he rebelled against him by sending ambassadors to Egypt, in order that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?

¹⁶As I live, says the Lord YHWH, surely in the place where the king resides who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke — in Babylon he shall die. ¹⁷Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when ramps are cast up and siege-walls built to cut off many lives.

¹⁸Because he despised the oath and broke the covenant, because he gave his hand and yet did all these things, he shall not escape.

¹⁹Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: As I live, I will surely return upon his head my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. ²⁰I will spread my net over him, and he shall be caught in my snare; I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treason he has committed against me. ²¹All 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, YHWH, have spoken.

Verses 11-18 offer an application of the parable, which is followed up in verses 19-21. The eagle stands for the Babylonian king, Nebuchadrezzar. The topmost shoot of the cedar stands for King Jeconiah and his leading officials who were taken as hostages to Babylon, already referred to as 'Chaldea, the land of merchants' (16:29). Nebuchadrezzar handed government of Jerusalem over to Zedekiah, the king's uncle, referred to here as 'one of the royal offspring'. The vine was allowed to 'spread out', but it was to 'remain low' — which is to say subservient to Babylon.

Verse 15 recalls the attempt by Zedekiah to organise an anti-Babylonian alliance in 594 (see Introduction page 24).

We are assured in verses 16-18 that Zedekiah's attempt to gain freedom through allying Judah with Egypt is doomed to failure. The language of these verses may be based on the actual events of 587.

The 'covenant' of verse 19 refers no longer to the conditions laid down by Babylon and agreed to by Zedekiah. Now the covenant is the commitment made to Israel by YHWH and the people's commitment to abide by it faithfully. It is YHWH who had determined to punish Judah and to have Zedekiah and 'the pick of his troops' taken into exile in Babylon (compare 12:13-15).

Here we have a second interpretation of the parable of 17:1-10. It is an oracle of salvation – a salvation which comes from YHWH's faithfulness to his commitment (in spite of the human infidelity outlined in 17:19-21).

²²Thus says the Lord YHWH: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

²³On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

²⁴All the trees of the field shall know that I am YHWH. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I YHWH have spoken; I will accomplish it.

The righteous will live

¹The word of YHWH came to me:

²What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? ³As I live, says the Lord YHWH, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.

⁴Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

⁵If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right — ⁶if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period, ⁷does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ⁸does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, ⁹follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully — such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord YHWH.

Chapter 18 is an attempt to defend the justice of God in the face of the experience of the suffering of the innocent. The attempt is ultimately unsuccessful because of the assumption that whatever happens is willed (controlled) by God. We looked at this in the Introduction (see pages 16-17). Ezekiel and his contemporaries would have had terrible experiences during and after the siege of 598. Witness the complaint in the Book of Lamentations: 'Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities' (5:7). They would have experienced the awful suffering of innocent children. Since they assumed that God was ultimately behind this, and since they believed that God must be just, they had to go into amazing contortions to try to make some sense of what was happening.

One standard traditional attempt was to speak of the suffering consequent upon sin affecting a sinner's descendants 'to the third and fourth generation' (Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18). It is thinking such as this that is behind the proverb quoted by Ezekiel in verse 2 and found also in Jeremiah 31:29. The standard theology is clearly unsatisfactory, and we find it 'softened' in Deuteronomy 7:10 which declares that God 'repays in their own person those who reject him.' This is demonstrated in Deuteronomic law (see Deuteronomy 24:16).

The problem, however, remained. Ezekiel returns to it in this chapter. He states: 'it is only the person who sins that shall die' (verse 4; repeated verse 20). This statement of faith hardly squared with his experience!

Verses 5-9 are an assurance that a person who is just (what this means is spelled out in the text) 'will surely live' (verse 9).

Ezekiel now moves to examine the case of a unrighteous son of a righteous father (verses 10-13). His father's goodness does not protect the son from suffering the consequences of his sinful behaviour. 'He shall surely die'(verse 13)

¹⁰If he has a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, ¹¹who does any of these things (though his father does none of them), who eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbour's wife, ¹²oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, ¹³takes advance or accrued interest; shall he then live? He shall not. He has done all these abominable things; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself.

Ezekiel's third scenario looks at a righteous son of an unrighteous father (verses 14-19). 'He shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live'(verse 17).

¹⁴But if this man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise, ¹⁵who does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour's wife, ¹⁶does not wrong anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ¹⁷withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no advance or accrued interest, observes my ordinances, and follows my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live.

The unrighteous father 'dies for his iniquity.'

In verse 19 Ezekiel distances himself from the traditional teaching, and in verse 20 he sums up his argument: one person's sin does not bring down punishment on another.

¹⁸As for his father, because he practised extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, he dies for his iniquity. ¹⁹Yet you say, "Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?" When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live.

²⁰The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.

²¹But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²²None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live.

²³Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord YHWH, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?

²⁴But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.

²⁵Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? ²⁶When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ²⁷Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. ²⁸Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Another scenario needs to be explored. What about the unrighteous person who changes his behaviour and does what is just (verses 21-22)? What about the righteous person who changes his behaviour and does what is unrighteous (verses 24)? In both cases he will experience the consequences of his choices.

Verse 23 breaks across the descriptions of the various cases that are covered in this chapter. It goes beyond all the talk of reward and punishment in a marvelous statement of faith in who YHWH is. YHWH wants not to remember our iniquity (verse 22). He wants us to live.

We are not told why the response to Ezekiel's reflections was so negative. Perhaps it simply reflects people's unwillingness to open up to ideas that go beyond what they are accustomed to hear.

Ezekiel puts the accent on personal responsibility and on the need for each generation to face up to doing God's will and not seek excuses for their sinful behaviour by blaming earlier generations. Perhaps his contemporaries in exile did not like having their excuses taken away? Perhaps they found uncomfortable his radical call for obedience to the Torah?

The matter of suffering and divine justice will need further theological reflection.

In this beautiful conclusion, Ezekiel does not solve the mystery of suffering or of divine justice. It is a passionate appeal to his contemporaries to repent, that is to say, to turn away from sin. It is an assurance that we are not locked into our past.

God is offering ‘a new heart and a new spirit’. Welcome it, and live. YHWH does not will anyone to die in the radical sense of existing out of communion with God. YHWH wants everyone to live. On this profound basis, Ezekiel is appealing to his contemporaries to accept God’s offer. Repent and live.

³⁰Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord YHWH. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin.

³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel?

³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord YHWH. Turn, then, and live.

¹As for you, raise up a lamentation for the princes of Israel, ²and say:

What a lioness was your mother, couched among lions! She lay down among young lions, rearing her cubs. ³She raised up one of her cubs; he became a young lion, and he learned to catch prey; he devoured people.

⁴The nations sounded an alarm against him; he was caught in their pit; and they brought him with hooks to the land of Egypt.

⁵When she saw that she was thwarted, that her hope was lost, she took another of her cubs and made him a young lion. ⁶He prowled among the lions; he became a young lion, and he learned to catch prey; he devoured people. ⁷And he ravaged their strongholds, and laid waste their towns; the land was appalled, and all in it, at the sound of his roaring.

⁸The nations set upon him from the provinces all around; they spread their net over him; he was caught in their pit.

⁹With hooks they put him in a cage, and brought him to the king of Babylon; they brought him into custody, so that his voice should be heard no more on the mountains of Israel.

In chapter 19 Ezekiel uses the traditional genre of the קִיּוֹן (verse 1 and 14; see 2:10) – a chant to lament the dead. An example can be found in Amos where he laments the fall of the house of Israel (5:2). Other examples are Isaiah 14, and, of course, the Book of Lamentations, mourning the fall of Jerusalem. Here in chapter 19, Ezekiel is lamenting the death of the royal House of Judah, the lioness of verses 1-9; and the vine of verses 10-14.

Verse 2 introduces an epic quality into the lament by referring to Judah's recent history. The first cub (verse 3) refers to Jehoiachaz, son of Josiah, whose reign lasted only 3 months. He was deported to Egypt by Pharaoh Neco in 608 (2Kings 23:31-33).

Some see Jehoiachin as the second cub. However, he reigned only during the last months of the siege and was taken to Babylon as a hostage when Jerusalem fell. The description of the reign and manner of being taken to Babylon would better suit Zedekiah, brother of Jehoiachaz, who was placed on the throne by Nebuchadrezzar in 597. He was captured in 587 and 'they bound him in fetters and took him to Babylon' (2Kings 25:7).

The lament discouraged those who saw the situation after 598, and then after 587, as provisional. They lived in the hope that God's judgment on the royal house would be rescinded. By using the literary form of a lament, Ezekiel (and whoever it was that updated his lament) was convinced that the royal house of Judah was dead.

The judgment of God is final. Does Ezekiel want us to see God as lamenting this death? The passionate cry of 18:23 makes this likely: 'Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord YHWH, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?'

Like verses 5-9, which appear to be an 'updating' of the lament, verses 10-14 appear to have been composed after 587, when the royal house was, indeed, 'dead'.

Here the royal house is no longer a lioness, but the more traditional vine (see 17:6-10).

Verse 13-14 lament the end of the royal house. There are no more shoots.

In his commentary Walther Zimmerli writes: 'In the burning of the royal vine there blazes the fire kindled by Zechariah's own treason (Ezekiel 17). The kingship is destroyed by its own sin' (page 398 column 2).

¹⁰Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard planted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water. ¹¹Its strongest stem became a ruler's sceptre; it towered aloft among the thick boughs; it stood out in its height with its mass of branches.

¹²But it was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground; the east wind dried it up; its fruit was stripped off, its strong stem was withered; the fire consumed it.

¹³Now it is planted into the wilderness, into a dry and thirsty land.

¹⁴And fire has gone out from its stem, has consumed its branches and fruit, so that there remains in it no strong stem, no sceptre for ruling.

This is a lamentation, and it is used as a lamentation.

Israel has sinned from the beginning

¹In the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month, certain elders of Israel came to consult YHWH, and sat down before me. ²And the word of YHWH came to me:

³Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel, and say to them: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Why are you coming? To consult me? As I live, says the Lord YHWH, I will not be consulted by you.

⁴Will you judge them, son of man, will you judge them? Then let them know the abominations of their ancestors, ⁵and say to them:

Thus says the Lord YHWH: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob—making myself known to them in the land of Egypt—I swore to them, saying, I am YHWH your God.

⁶On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. ⁷And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am YHWH your God.

⁸But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; not one of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.

⁹But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt.

Ezekiel's call-vision is dated in 593 (1:1-2). A later vision is dated in 592 (8:1). This scene is dated 591. So we are still in the period between the capture of Jerusalem in 598, and the sacking of the city in 587. The elders have come to Ezekiel in the hope of hearing a word from YHWH to assure them that the exile is about to finish. However Ezekiel is commanded by God to confront the people with their sin.

Verses 5-26 present the history of Israel as having been, from the beginning, a history of sin.

In verses 5-7 Ezekiel, in YHWH's name, reminds the elders of YHWH's commitment to their ancestors when they were still in Egypt. He promised to lead them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. To enjoy this land they were required to cast away their gods and commit themselves to the God who was liberating them, to YHWH.

For Ezekiel there was not an original idyllic period. From the very beginnings of Israel they 'would not listen'. God thought to vent his anger upon them while they were still in Egypt, but he wanted the surrounding nations to see his power and his faithful love, and so he brought them 'out of the land of Egypt' in spite of their infidelity.

In the wilderness YHWH gave them the Torah, revealing the way that would give everyone life if they would observe it (compare Leviticus 18:5). In full agreement with the Priestly tradition, the sabbath has a special place in the covenant: 'You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, YHWH, sanctify you' (Exodus 31:13). The sabbath seems to have taken on special importance in exile where the cult was no longer possible. Observance of the sabbath was a clear identifying mark that distinguished the exiles from Judah from the locals and the other exiles.

Just as they rebelled in Egypt, so they rebel in the wilderness (verse 13).

YHWH was tempted to 'make an end of them' in the wilderness, but once again relented. He wanted the nations to know him as a God who liberates, and who is faithful to his commitments (verse 14; compare verse 9).

However, the wilderness generation would not see the Promised Land (verses 15-16).

YHWH instructs the next generation not to follow the example of their parents. He offers them what he offered their parents: the Torah and especially the sabbath (verses 19-20; compare verses 11-12).

¹⁰So I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness.

¹¹I gave them my statutes and showed them my ordinances, by whose observance everyone shall live. ¹²Moreover I gave them my sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, so that they might know that I YHWH sanctify them.

¹³But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness; they did not observe my statutes but rejected my ordinances, by whose observance everyone shall live; and my sabbaths they greatly profaned. Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them in the wilderness, to make an end of them. ¹⁴But I acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out.

¹⁵Moreover I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land that I had given them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands, ¹⁶because they rejected my ordinances and did not observe my statutes, and profaned my sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols.

¹⁷Nevertheless my eye spared them, and I did not destroy them or make an end of them in the wilderness. ¹⁸I said to their children in the wilderness, Do not follow the statutes of your parents, nor observe their ordinances, nor defile yourselves with their idols. ¹⁹I YHWH am your God; follow my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances, ²⁰and hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you, so that you may know that I YHWH am your God.

²¹But the children rebelled against me; they did not follow my statutes, and were not careful to observe my ordinances, by whose observance everyone shall live; they profaned my sabbaths. Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness.

²²But I withheld my hand, and acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out.

²³Moreover I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, ²⁴because they had not executed my ordinances, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their ancestors' idols.

²⁵Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. ²⁶I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am YHWH.

The second generation chose to perpetuate the rebellion of their parents. For the third time the pattern of rebellion, the deserved threat of punishment and God's relenting repeats itself (verses 21-22; compare 8-9 and 13-14).

The people did enter the Promised Land, but YHWH guaranteed on his word that their rebellion would lead to their being scattered among the nations (verse 23; see Psalm 106:27). This happened in the northern kingdom in 721, and again in 598 to Judah and Jerusalem. Ezekiel and the elders were experiencing this scattering.

The idea of YHWH giving the Torah to them to bring evil and death to them (verse 25-26) is unique in the Hebrew Bible. Ezekiel seems to be making the point that evil and death came upon Israel because of the Torah, since it was their refusal to obey it that brought punishment upon them.

As an example of a statute that issued in death, Ezekiel refers to the following: 'The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me' (Exodus 22:29). In a practice especially associated with the times of Manasseh, this statute was taken literally when they copied the pagan practices of their neighbours and sacrificed their children to God (see 16:20; compare 2Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; 23:10,13). This was in spite of the fact that the legend of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22), as well as statutes in the Torah (Exodus 13:13,15) stated that this is not God's way.

Verses 27-29 expand the history of sin by demonstrating that the history of Israel in the land was one of constant infidelity and rebellion as they went to the 'high places' (בְּמִזְבְּחֵי) to worship the pagan gods of their neighbours.

By way of conclusion verses 30-31 repeat God's refusal expressed at the beginning of this passage in verse 3. The elders are looking to YHWH for a word of salvation. They think that they should be able to be assured of it because they are, after all, God's chosen people. Chapter 20 has presented their history as one of constant, obstinate, infidelity. They have no right to expect a blessing from YHWH.

²⁷Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel and say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: In this again your ancestors blasphemed me, by dealing treacherously with me. ²⁸For when I had brought them into the land that I swore to give them, then wherever they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices and presented the provocation of their offering; there they sent up their pleasing odours, and there they poured out their drink offerings. ²⁹(I said to them, What is the high place to which you go? So it is called Bamah to this day.)

³⁰Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord YHWH: Will you defile yourselves after the manner of your ancestors and go astray after their detestable things?

³¹When you offer your gifts and make your children pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. And shall I be consulted by you, O house of Israel? As I live, says the Lord YHWH, I will not be consulted by you.

³²What is in your mind shall never happen—the thought, “Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone.” ³³As I live, says the Lord YHWH, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out, I will be king over you. ³⁴I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out; ³⁵and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. ³⁶As I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, says the Lord YHWH.

³⁷I will make you pass under the staff, and will bring you within the bond of the covenant. ³⁸I will purge out the rebels among you, and those who transgress against me; I will bring them out of the land where they reside as aliens, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am YHWH.

³⁹As for you, O house of Israel, thus says the Lord YHWH: Go serve your idols, everyone of you now and hereafter, if you will not listen to me; but my holy name you shall no more profane with your gifts and your idols.

⁴⁰For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, says the Lord YHWH, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land; there I will accept them, and there I will require your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your sacred things.

Verse 32 expresses a not unexpected response of the exiles to the declarations of 20:1-31. Since there appears to be no hope in YHWH, they may as well follow their pagan neighbours and worship local gods.

Against this YHWH promises a new exodus for a purified people. His ‘mighty hand and outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out’ was shown in Egypt at the first exodus. It will be repeated against Israel’s enemies, and against those within Israel who rebel. This time YHWH will bring out his people, not only from Babylon, but also from Assyria (2Kings 17:6) and Egypt (Jeremiah 43). As he did in the wilderness of Sinai, so now YHWH will judge the nation, but also those within it who rebel (see Numbers 16:31ff).

‘Passing under the staff’ refers to a shepherd checking on his sheep.

They must choose. If they do not want the redemption YHWH is offering, then let them do what they were thinking in verse 32: worship other gods. If they want his redemption they must commit themselves to the covenant.

Notice that the word ‘there’ (הָהֵּן) is emphasised three times in verse 40. Their attention is being drawn to ‘my holy mountain’, arousing in them a desire for home in order to strengthen their repentance.

Once again in verse 41 we witness the desire of YHWH that all nations will come to know him and acknowledge him as God, by seeing his faithfulness to Israel.

By remembering God's just punishment, the returned exiles will remember their past sin in order not to repeat it, but to live in faithful communion with their God.

It will be seen by all that while YHWH must punish sin, it is not people's sin that defines his action, but his own over-riding fidelity to who he is.

⁴¹As a pleasing odour I will accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples, and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations. ⁴²You shall know that I am YHWH, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the country that I swore to give to your ancestors.

⁴³There you shall remember your ways and all the deeds by which you have polluted yourselves; and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed.

⁴⁴And you shall know that I am YHWH, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, or corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, says the Lord YHWH.

¹The word of YHWH came to me:

²Son of man, set your face toward the south, preach against the south, and prophesy against the forest land in the south; ³say to the forest in the south: Hear the word of YHWH: Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree; the blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it. ⁴All flesh shall see that I YHWH have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.

⁵Then I said, "Ah Lord YHWH! they are saying of me, 'Does he not speak in riddles?'"

⁶The word of YHWH came to me:

⁷Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries; prophesy against the land of Israel ⁸and say to the land of Israel, Thus says YHWH: I am coming against you, and will draw my sword out of its sheath, and will cut off from you both righteous and wicked. ⁹Because I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked, therefore my sword shall go out of its sheath against all flesh from south to north; ¹⁰and all flesh shall know that I YHWH have drawn my sword out of its sheath; it shall not be sheathed again.

¹¹Moan therefore, son of man; moan with breaking heart and bitter grief before their eyes. ¹²And when they say to you, "Why do you moan?" you shall say, "Because of the news that has come. Every heart will melt and all hands will be feeble, every spirit will faint and all knees will turn to water. See, it comes and it will be fulfilled," says the Lord YHWH.

Following the Hebrew and Greek, we are numbering the first verse here as 21:1. English Bibles tend to follow the Latin which begins chapter 21 at what is here verse 6. Verses 1-5 are numbered 20:45-49.

Both **יָמֵן** and **נָגַב** are used here in a directional sense for 'south', used in relation to the 'north', from which direction the invading army is to come to Judah and Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 50:3). 'Forest land' is not used to describe the geography of Judah. Rather it is a metaphor in keeping with the image of a conflagration which is to devour Jerusalem and its surroundings. All the world will see the conflagration as a revelation of YHWH (verse 4).

The 'riddle' (**מִשְׁלַל**) is decoded in the following verses, which make it clear that YHWH's word concerns Jerusalem and the land of Israel (the 'south'), and the YHWH's punishing 'sword' ('fire').

Verse 9 takes no account of the distinctions of righteous and unrighteous argued in chapter 18. There the prophet was addressing those in exile, and calling them to repentance. Here he is addressing those in Judah who think they can escape judgment.

The prophet's feelings are given as a response to YHWH's instruction. This is typical of the Ezekiel scroll, unlike that of Jeremiah where feelings arise from the spontaneous reaction of the prophet to what he is asked to declare.

There is no avoiding of the coming punishment. It will be unrelenting.

In the mythological language adopted in the biblical tradition, we find a flashing sword barring entrance to the garden of Eden (see Genesis 3:24). YHWH, the warrior God, conquers chaos with a sword (see Isaiah 27:1).

From the earliest prophets, YHWH is pictured as wielding a sword to punish those who rebel against him (see Amos 4:10; 7:9; 9:1; see also Jeremiah 47:6-7; 50:35-38).

In the context of Ezekiel, the 'slayer' (verse 16) is undoubtedly Nebuchadrezzar.

The threat expressed in verses 17-18 was carried out in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587.

In his anger YHWH is determined to carry out the threatened slaughter, to 'satisfy my fury' (verse 22).

¹³And the word of YHWH came to me: ¹⁴Son of man, prophesy and say: Thus says the Lord; Say: A sword, a sword is sharpened; it is also polished.

¹⁵It is sharpened for slaughter, polished to flash like lightning! How can we make merry? You have despised the rod, and all discipline.

¹⁶The sword is given to be polished, to be grasped in the hand; it is sharpened, the sword is polished, to be placed in the slayer's hand.

¹⁷Cry and wail, son of man, for it is against my people; it is against all Israel's princes; they are thrown to the sword, together with my people. Ah! Slap your thigh! ¹⁸For consider: What! If you despise the rod, will it not happen? says the Lord YHWH.

¹⁹And you, son of man, prophesy; Strike hand to hand. Let the sword fall twice, thrice; it is a sword for killing. A sword for great slaughter — it surrounds them; ²⁰therefore hearts melt and many stumble. At all their gates I have set the point of the sword. Ah! It is made for flashing, it is polished for slaughter.

²¹Attack to the right! Engage to the left! Wherever your edge is directed.

²²I too will strike hand to hand, I will satisfy my fury; I YHWH have spoken.

Nebuchadrezzar will reduce Jerusalem to a ruin

²³The word of YHWH came to me:

²⁴Son of man, mark out two roads for the sword of the king of Babylon to come; both of them shall issue from the same land. And make a signpost, make it for a fork in the road leading to a city; ²⁵mark out the road for the sword to come to Rabbah of the Ammonites or to Judah and to Jerusalem the fortified.

²⁶For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the fork in the two roads, to use divination; he shakes the arrows, he consults the teraphim, he inspects the liver. ²⁷Into his right hand comes the lot for Jerusalem, to set battering rams, to call out for slaughter, for raising the battle cry, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up ramps, to build siege-towers.

²⁸But to them it will seem like a false divination; they have sworn solemn oaths; but he brings their guilt to mind, bringing about their capture.

²⁹Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Because you have brought your guilt to mind, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear—because you have been brought to mind, you shall be taken in hand.

³⁰As for you, vile, wicked prince of Israel, you whose day has come, the time of final punishment, ³¹thus says the Lord YHWH: Remove the turban, take off the crown; things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, abase that which is high. ³²A ruin, a ruin, a ruin — I will make it! Finish with it by the time when he comes to whom judgment belongs, and I give it to him.

Once again, Ezekiel is commanded to perform a symbolic action.

Its meaning is explained. In 589 Nebuchadrezzar advanced west against Judah and Ammon who had broken their oath and gone over to Egypt. Having divined the will of the gods by use of arrows, by inquiry of the teraphim (small images of household gods? compare Genesis 31:19ff) and by examining liver, he chooses to take the road to Jerusalem where he will besiege the city.

Judah and Ammon may not recognise the validity of the divination, but YHWH is behind it, for they have broken their oath (by looking to Egypt). Their guilt is exposed and Nebuchadrezzar will be victorious (verse 28-29).

The wicked prince is Zedekiah. His insignia of office will be torn from him. He will be humiliated, and YHWH is giving to Nebuchadrezzar the authority to carry out divine justice.

This appears to be a later unit introduced into the text to speak of the fate of the Ammonites mentioned in verse 25. We hear later (see 25:1-7) that they gloated over the terrible destruction of Jerusalem. In terms copied from the preceding verses, we are told that Ammon will share the fate of Jerusalem. Their looking to their gods will not protect them.

Verses 35-37 speak of the fate of Babylon. Nebuchadrezzar is carrying out the will of YHWH in his destruction of Jerusalem. When he has fulfilled this mission, however, Babylon, in its turn, will be destroyed.

³³As for you, son of man, prophesy, and say, Thus says the Lord YHWH concerning the Ammonites, and concerning their reproach; say: A sword, a sword! Drawn for slaughter Polished to consume, to flash like lightning. ³⁴Offering false visions for you, divining lies for you, they place you over the necks of the vile, wicked ones — those whose day has come, the time of final punishment.

³⁵Return it to its sheath! In the place where you were created, in the land of your origin, I will judge you.

³⁶I will pour out my indignation upon you, with the fire of my wrath I will blow upon you. I will deliver you into brutish hands, those skillful to destroy. ³⁷You shall be fuel for the fire, your blood shall enter the earth; You shall be remembered no more, for I YHWH have spoken.

¹The word of YHWH came to me:

²You, son of man, will you judge, will you judge the bloody city? Then declare to it all its abominable deeds. ³You shall say, Thus says the Lord YHWH:

A city! Shedding blood within itself; its time has come; making its idols, defiling itself. ⁴You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed, and defiled by the idols that you have made; you have brought your day near, the appointed time of your years has come. Therefore I have made you a disgrace before the nations, and a mockery to all the countries. ⁵Those who are near and those who are far from you will mock you, you infamous one, full of tumult.

⁶The princes of Israel in you, every-one according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. ⁷Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you. ⁸You have despised my holy things, and profaned my sabbaths. ⁹In you are those who slander to shed blood, those in you who eat upon the mountains, who commit lewdness in your midst. ¹⁰In you they uncover their fathers' nakedness; in you they violate women in their menstrual periods. ¹¹One commits abomination with his neighbour's wife; another lewdly defiles his daughter-in-law; another in you defiles his sister, his father's daughter. ¹²In you, they take bribes to shed blood; you take both advance interest and accrued interest, and make gain of your neighbours by extortion; and you have forgotten me, says the Lord YHWH.

As in chapters 16 and 20, Ezekiel is called to judge and accuse.

Typical of a priestly perspective, idolatry and social injustice are closely linked. Wrong relations with God issue in wrong social relationships. Blood-guilt covers both.

In verse 6 the accusation begins. It is by way of direct address to Jerusalem in the second person. Note the expression 'in you' (בְּךָ) occurs nine times in this passage. The especially emphatic 'in your midst' (בְּתוֹכְךָ) occurs twice.

Verses 6-12 offer an overall view of the failure of Jerusalem, led by its princes, to obey the covenant. It is all summed up in the final statement in verse 12: 'you have forgotten me, says the Lord YHWH' (compare Hosea 4:6 and Jeremiah 7:28).

God cannot let Israel ignore his will, given to them as a gift in the Torah. Verses 13-16 spell out the punishment. The focus is on the ‘scattering among the nations’ (compare 12:15; 20:23). This is not simply punishment. It is to ‘purge your filthiness out of you’, so that ‘you shall know that I am YHWH’. This, even though the fate of his people casts doubts on YHWH ‘in the sight of the nations’.

In a metaphor found also in Isaiah 1:21-25, Ezekiel compares the useless ‘house of Israel’ to the useless dross left over from the process of refining metals. We may think of the useless vine of Ezekiel 15, fit only to be consumed by fire. Here the fire reveals Jerusalem as being nothing but dross.

¹³See, I clap my hands at the dishonest gain you have made, and at the blood that has been shed within you. ¹⁴Can your courage endure, or can your hands remain strong in the days when I shall deal with you? I YHWH have spoken, and I will do it. ¹⁵I will scatter you among the nations and disperse you through the countries, and I will purge your filthiness out of you. ¹⁶And I shall be profaned through you in the sight of the nations; and you shall know that I am YHWH.

¹⁷The word of YHWH came to me: ¹⁸Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them, silver, bronze, tin, iron, and lead. In the smelter they have become dross. ¹⁹Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. ²⁰As one gathers silver, bronze, iron, lead, and tin into a smelter, to blow the fire upon them in order to melt them; so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. ²¹I will gather you and blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted within it. ²²As silver is melted in a smelter, so you shall be melted in it; and you shall know that I YHWH have poured out my wrath upon you.

A complete failure of leadership

²³The word of YHWH came to me:

²⁴Son of man, say to it: You are a land that is not cleansed, not rained upon in the day of indignation.

²⁵Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it.

²⁶Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

²⁷Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain.

²⁸Its prophets have smeared white-wash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, "Thus says the Lord YHWH," when YHWH has not spoken.

²⁹The people of the land have practised extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress.

³⁰And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. ³¹Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord YHWH.

Ezekiel is not the first prophet to list those especially responsible for the breakdown of the relationship between YHWH and his people. Micah lists the princes, priests and prophets (3:11). Jeremiah lists the prophets and priests (5:31). Ezekiel appears to draw on Zephaniah:

The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons; its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law ... My decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger.

– Zephaniah 3:3-4,8

Ezekiel accuses the rulers of greed and violence (verse 25).

He accuses the priests of violence against the teachings of the Torah, especially in relation to the cult and to the sabbath (verse 26).

In verse 28 he summarises his accusations against the false prophets (see Ezekiel 13:6-11).

In verse 29 he accuses the landowners of failing to observe justice as required by the Torah.

This has left YHWH with no choice but to 'destroy' the land.

Ezekiel is drawing on a prophetic tradition of comparing Israel to an unfaithful wife (see Hosea 1:2, Jeremiah 2:2, 3:6ff, and earlier Ezekiel 16). There are different interpretations of the significance of the names of the two sisters. ‘ohol’ (אָהוֹל) stands for tent. Some see ‘Oholah’ as meaning ‘her tent in her’ and Oholibah’ as meaning ‘my tent in her’. They suggest that Ezekiel sees the Jerusalem temple, as being YHWH’s tent, unlike the temple in Samaria. Others suggest that in both cases Ezekiel is referring to pagan sanctuaries set up in the high places. Others again see the names as referring only to the origin of both sisters among the desert tent-dwellers, without any reference to sanctuaries.

Verses 5-10 focus on the older sister (Samaria), who continued the infidelity she showed in Egypt, by looking to Assyria to meet her needs instead of YHWH, even to worshipping the Assyrian gods (verse 7).

Verses 9-10 refer back to the capture of Samaria in 721, and the exile of its citizens (compare Isaiah 47:2-3; 2Kings 17).

¹The word of YHWH came to me: ²Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother; ³they played the whore in Egypt; they played the whore in their youth; their breasts were caressed there, and their virgin bosoms were fondled. ⁴Oholah was the name of the elder and Oholibah the name of her sister. They became mine, and they bore sons and daughters. As for their names, Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.

⁵Oholah played the whore while she was mine; she lusted after her lovers the Assyrians, warriors ⁶clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, mounted horsemen. ⁷She bestowed her favours upon them, the choicest men of Assyria all of them; and she defiled herself with all the idols of everyone for whom she lusted. ⁸She did not give up her whorings that she had practised since Egypt; for in her youth men had lain with her and fondled her virgin bosom and poured out their lust upon her.

⁹Therefore I delivered her into the hands of her lovers, into the hands of the Assyrians, for whom she lusted. ¹⁰These uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and her daughters; and they killed her with the sword. Judgment was executed upon her, and she became a byword among women.

Looking to Assyria, Babylon, and then Egypt

¹¹Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet she was more corrupt than she in her lusting and in her whorings, which were worse than those of her sister. ¹²She lusted after the Assyrians, governors and commanders, warriors clothed in full armour, mounted horsemen, all of them handsome young men. ¹³And I saw that she was defiled; they both took the same way.

¹⁴But she carried her whorings further; she saw male figures carved on the wall, images of the Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion, ¹⁵with belts around their waists, with flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like officers—a picture of Babylonians whose native land was Chaldea. ¹⁶When she saw them she lusted after them, and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. ¹⁷And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their lust; and after she defiled herself with them, she turned from them in disgust.

¹⁸When she carried on her whorings so openly and flaunted her nakedness, I turned in disgust from her, as I had turned from her sister. ¹⁹Yet she increased her whorings, remembering the days of her youth, when she played the whore in the land of Egypt²⁰ and lusted after her paramours there, whose members were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of stallions. ²¹Thus you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians fondled your bosom and caressed your young breasts.

Verses 11-27 focus on the younger sister, Jerusalem, whose infidelity was even worse than that of the older sister, Samaria.

Verses 12-13 recall Judah's embracing of her Assyrian overlord. This was especially during the reign of King Manasseh (c. 698-643BC).

Verses 14-18 speak of Judah's attempt to find security through alliance with Babylon. This may include King Josiah's attempt to prevent the Egyptian army from coming to the assistance of Assyria against Babylon in 609BC - an attempt that cost Josiah his life.

The Pharaoh, Neco, placed Jehoiakim on the throne of his father Josiah. Jerusalem now began to favour Egypt. Things had now turned full circle. Having dallied with Assyria and Babylon, they were now back with Egypt. This led to the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadrezzar, but Zedekiah kept looking to Egypt to free his country from the Babylonian yoke. This has been central to Ezekiel's concern throughout the scroll to this point.

All her 'lovers' will, on YHWH's instigation, turn against Jerusalem. In verse 23 the foreign Aramean Chaldeans are distinguished from the local Babylonians. Mention is also made of Pekod (compare Jeremiah 50:22), an Aramean tribe in east Babylonia; also Shoa (compare Isaiah 22:5), which would appear to be a nomadic tribe of the Syro-Arabian desert; and Koa, an otherwise unidentified tribe. The Assyrians are included in view of verse 12.

Judah's enemies apart from Egypt always attacked 'from the north'(verse 24; see Jeremiah 4:6-7).

Jerusalem's 'finery' was described in 16:10-13.

Ezekiel is attacking Judah's complacency, based on an assurance that they are YHWH's chosen people. They learned nothing from the fall of Samaria in 721, and they seem not to have learned from the recent capture of Jerusalem in 598. It is true that YHWH's love is offered unconditionally to his people, and YHWH remains faithful. The receiving and enjoyment of this love, however, depends on Judah's choice and fidelity to that choice.

²²Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord YHWH: I will rouse against you your lovers from whom you turned in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side: ²³the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, handsome young men, governors and commanders all of them, officers and warriors, all of them riding on horses. ²⁴They shall come against you from the north with chariots and wagons and a host of peoples; they shall set themselves against you on every side with buckler, shield, and helmet, and I will commit the judgment to them, and they shall judge you according to their ordinances.

²⁵I will direct my indignation against you, in order that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. ²⁶They shall also strip you of your clothes and take away your fine jewels. ²⁷So I will put an end to your lewdness and your whoring brought from the land of Egypt; you shall not long for them, or remember Egypt any more.

²⁸For thus says the Lord YHWH: I will deliver you into the hands of those whom you hate, into the hands of those from whom you turned in disgust; ²⁹and they shall deal with you in hatred, and take away all the fruit of your labour, and leave you naked and bare, and the nakedness of your whorings shall be exposed. Your lewdness and your whorings ³⁰have brought this upon you, because you played the whore with the nations, and polluted yourself with their idols.

³¹You have gone the way of your sister; therefore I will give her cup into your hand. ³²Thus says the Lord YHWH: You shall drink your sister's cup, deep and wide; you shall be scorned and derided, it holds so much. ³³You shall be filled with drunkenness and sorrow. A cup of horror and desolation is the cup of your sister Samaria; ³⁴you shall drink it and drain it out, and gnaw its sherds, and tear out your breasts; for I have spoken, says the Lord YHWH.

³⁵Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Because you have forgotten me and cast me behind your back, therefore bear the consequences of your lewdness and whorings.

Verses 28-30 appear to be an addition, summarising and reinforcing the judgment already presented in chapter 23.

Verses 31-34 are further supplementary material, now using the metaphor of a cup. Jerusalem must drink the cup already drunk by Samaria. It will cause her to stagger and fall..

Verses 36-39 and verses 40-44 appear to be later material from the Ezekiel School.

Verse 37 picks up the adultery and blood guilt from 16:38, identified as idolatry and child sacrifice from 16:21.

Verse 38 speaks of profaning the sabbaths (see 20:13, 16, 21; 22:8). Compare the following from Leviticus:

You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am YHWH.

– Leviticus 19:30

Verses 40-44 are a later summary of the contents of chapter 23:1-27.

In this later moralising addition, the focus of verses 48-49 is no longer on Samaria and Jerusalem. The metaphor of adultery is applied to personal behaviour which is judged and will be punished.

³⁶YHWH said to me: Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then declare to them their abominable deeds. ³⁷For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands; with their idols they have committed adultery; and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me. ³⁸Moreover this they have done to me: they have defiled my sanctuary on the same day and profaned my sabbaths. ³⁹For when they had slaughtered their children for their idols, on the same day they came into my sanctuary to profane it. This is what they did in my house.

⁴⁰They even sent for men to come from far away, to whom a messenger was sent, and they came. For them you bathed yourself, painted your eyes, and decked yourself with ornaments; ⁴¹you sat on a stately couch, with a table spread before it on which you had placed my incense and my oil. ⁴²The sound of a raucous multitude was around her, with many of the rabble brought in drunken from the wilderness; and they put bracelets on the arms of the women, and beautiful crowns upon their heads. ⁴³Then I said, Ah, she is worn out with adulteries, but they carry on their sexual acts with her. ⁴⁴For they have gone in to her, as one goes in to a whore. Thus they went in to Oholah and to Oholibah, wanton women.

⁴⁵But righteous judges shall declare them guilty of adultery and of bloodshed; because they are adulteresses and blood is on their hands. ⁴⁶For thus says the Lord YHWH: Bring up an assembly against them, and make them an object of terror and of plunder. ⁴⁷The assembly shall stone them and with their swords they shall cut them down; they shall kill their sons and their daughters, and burn up their houses. ⁴⁸Thus will I put an end to lewdness in the land, so that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done. ⁴⁹They shall repay you for your lewdness, and you shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry; and you shall know that I am the Lord YHWH.

¹In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, the word of YHWH came to me: ²Son of man, write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day. ³And utter a parable to the rebellious house and say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH:

Put on the pot, put it on, pour in water also; ⁴put in it the pieces, all the good pieces, the thigh and the shoulder; fill it with choice bones. ⁵Take the choicest one of the flock, pile the logs under it; boil its pieces, stew also its bones in it.

⁶Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Woe to the city of blood, the pot whose filth is in it, whose filth has not gone out of it! Empty it piece by piece, making no choice at all. ⁷For the blood she shed is inside it; she placed it on a bare rock; she did not pour it out on the ground, to cover it with earth. ⁸To rouse my wrath, to take vengeance, I have placed the blood she shed on a bare rock, so that it may not be covered.

⁹Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Woe to the city of blood! I will even make a great pyre. ¹⁰Heap up the logs, kindle the fire; boil the meat well, mix in the spices, let the bones be burned. ¹¹Stand it empty upon the coals, so that it may become hot, its copper glow, its filth melt in it, its filth be consumed. ¹²In vain I have wearied myself; its compacted filth does not depart. To the fire with its filth! ¹³Yet, when I cleansed you in your filthy lewdness, you did not become clean from your filth; you shall not again be cleansed until I have satisfied my fury upon you. ¹⁴I YHWH have spoken; the time is coming, I will act. I will not refrain, I will not spare, I will not relent. According to your ways and your doings I will judge you, says the Lord YHWH.

Verses 1-2 connect the sign-action and prophetic words of chapter 24 with the exact date of the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem in 588. The form in which the date is given differs from that of the three previous dates (see 1:2, 8:1 and 20:1). These locate Ezekiel's mission in the years between the capture of Jerusalem in 597 and the beginning of the siege of 588. The previous 23 chapters fall into those years. The date given here is inserted from 2Kings 25:1.

The cooking scene (verses 3-5), presented as a 'parable' (מִשְׁלָּה), recalls a story from the legends associated with Elisha (see 2Kings 4:38-41).

In verses 6-8 we begin to grasp something of the meaning hidden in what could otherwise appear to be a simple everyday action. Divine wrath and vengeance are present, motivated by bloodshed present in the 'city of blood'. God will not allow them to cover up their evil deeds.

These prophetic words are spoken against the complacency of those who escaped the deportation ten years earlier. We have already been told that those who remained in Jerusalem claimed the property of the exiles (see 11:15), and boasted that they were secure in YHWH's city.

We have already heard words from the prophet that warn of the folly of such an attitude. Here Ezekiel sees that the beginning of the siege of 588 will spell the final downfall of the rebellious city. His words would also dash any hopes his fellow exiles had of an imminent return from exile.

The sudden death of his wife, and his inability to give expression to his overwhelming grief in the customary way becomes for Ezekiel a sign of a message he is to relay to his fellow exiles. We have already seen his experience of paralysis (3:15), his inability to speak (3:26), and his inability to move (3:25; 4:4-8) functioning as a sign.

The question put to him in verse 19 provides the occasion for his declaring to the people YHWH's word. Just as Ezekiel has experienced the death of his beloved wife, 'the light of his eyes', so the people will experience the loss of the sanctuary, as well as the members of their families left behind when they were taken to Babylon as hostages ten years before.

There is no point in their carrying out the accustomed mourning rites, for it is YHWH himself who is determining this loss (verse 21). Any appeal to YHWH would be pointless.

News of the success of the siege and the fall of the city and its temple will be brought to Ezekiel. Then all will be made clear.

Before recording the fall of Jerusalem (chapter 33), those responsible for the Ezekiel scroll insert the following oracles against the nations (chapters 25-32).

¹⁵The word of YHWH came to me: ¹⁶Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. ¹⁷Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover your upper lip or eat the bread of mourners. ¹⁸So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded.

¹⁹Then the people said to me, "Will you not tell us what these things mean for us, that you are acting this way?" ²⁰Then I said to them: The word of YHWH came to me: ²¹Say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will profane my sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and your heart's desire; and your sons and your daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword. ²²And you shall do as I have done; you shall not cover your upper lip or eat the bread of mourners. ²³Your turbans shall be on your heads and your sandals on your feet; you shall not mourn or weep, but you shall pine away in your iniquities and groan to one another. ²⁴Thus Ezekiel shall be a sign to you; you shall do just as he has done. When this comes, then you shall know that I am the Lord YHWH.

²⁵And you, son of man, on the day when I take from them their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their heart's affection, and also their sons and their daughters, ²⁶on that day, one who has escaped will come to you to report to you the news. ²⁷On that day your mouth shall be opened to the one who has escaped, and you shall speak and no longer be silent. So you shall be a sign to them; and they shall know that I am YHWH.

