

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 17, Edom's Fate Versus Israel's Future, Ezekiel 35:1-36:15

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 17, Edom's Fate Versus Israel's Future. Ezekiel 35:1-36:15.

We are now in the middle of the fifth part of the book, I judge, which ran from, started with chapter 33 and is going to run on to the end of chapter 37.

This time, we are going to be studying a section from 35:1 to halfway through chapter 36:15. And I call this Edom's fate versus Israel's future. In the Christian tradition of chapter divisions, this section has been split between two chapters, 35 and 36, the first half of 36. It's really a single literary unit.

As we can tell, we can find evidence in that in 35:1, and we find the formula for receiving a prophetic message: the word of the Lord came to me, and we're going to get the next. In 36:16, the word of the Lord came to me. And so, 35:1 as far as 36:15 belong together. Chapter 35 is really a message directed against Edom.

And we might wonder what it's doing here. Why was it not included in the collection of foreign messages in chapters 25 through 32? In fact, there, there was a message against Edom in that collection at 25:12-14. At that place, the accusation concerned the Edomite's support of the Babylonians in their capture of Jerusalem in 587. Edom is here called Mount Seir, the geographical name of the mountainous area southeast of Judah and south of the Dead Sea.

That was where the Edomites lived. In chapter 35, the accusation is not only about 587; it's also about the Edomites' subsequent occupation of the southern areas of Judah after Judah had been defeated and many had been deported to Babylon. So, this message against Edom belongs to a later period than the one in chapter 35.

But why wasn't it put there? The answer is that in 35 through 36:15 we have two contrasting messages put side by side deliberately. First a message of judgment against Edom and then a message of salvation for Israel. The first is a foil for the second.

Chapter 35 is present at this juncture because of 36:1-15, for the sake of 36:1-15. It's like a red light for crossing traffic that corresponds to and confirms the green light for ongoing, forward-moving traffic. Edom's progress is to be checked while Israel's progress is affirmed. Historically, Israel and Edom had long had an off-on relationship.

They traced their common ancestry back to Jacob and Esau. They were brothers who did not get along. In recent history, Edom had sent a representative to the anti-Babylonian conference in Jerusalem in 594.

We've looked at that twice, hitherto in Jeremiah 27 in verse 3, that conference of Western states planning rebellion, all planning rebellion against Babylon. However, eventually, Edom decided it was more expedient to be an ally of Babylon than its foe. They would rather not suffer at Babylon's hands as, in fact, Judah did.

Judah never forgot Edom's switching, and from then on, Edom was Judah's arch-enemy. Psalm 137 makes special mention of Edom's attitude in 587. In verse 7 of the psalm, it says, Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, Tear it down, tear it down, down to its foundations.

And then Lamentations 4:22 reads very much like a summary of Ezekiel 35-36:15 on a much smaller scale. This is what Lamentations 4:22 says, The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Babylon, is accomplished. God will keep you in exile no longer, but your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish, he will uncover your sins.

And we have a very similar attitude here in this section. Chapter 35 is actually a collection of messages. It's 2-4, 5-9, 10-13, and 14-15.

Each of the messages is a message of judgment that ends, or virtually ends, on the same note with the recognition formula. In verse 4 it's, You shall know that I am the Lord. So, it is in verse 9, So you shall know that I am the Lord.

While verse 12 puts it in the form, You shall know that I, the Lord, have heard all the abusive speech, and so on. And it closes with, I will deal with you, and then they shall know that I am the Lord. And so, Edom is going to learn the lesson of God's providential punishment from its own experience of suffering in due course.

The first message in verses 2-4 pronounces judgment in a forceful way, and it doesn't cite any accusation. It's a stark and powerful opening to the chapter. Ezekiel is told to stare fixedly in the direction of Edom, prophesy against it, and say, thus says the Lord God, I am against you, Mount Sair.

I stretch out my hand against you to make you a desolation and a waste. I lay your towns in ruins. You shall become a desolation, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

Plain, direct speaking there. The second message in verses 5-9 moves from a short accusation in verse 5 to a long sentence of punishment in verses 6-9. The accusation in verse 5 says that because you cherished an ancient enmity and gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword at the time of their calamity, at the time of their final punishment,

We notice the accusation is neatly prefaced with because, and it's going to lead on to the judgment with its signal, therefore, in verse 6. This particular accusation in verse 5 is very much like the one that we had in chapter 25. It focuses on the active involvement of the Edomites when Jerusalem fell in 587. The little book of Obadiah serves as a commentary on their role.

We've read it before, but let's remind us of these verses, verses 10-14, which are a sort of commentary on this particular verse here in 35:5. For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them.

You should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune. You should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin. You should not have boasted on the day of distress.

You should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their calamity. You should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's disaster on the day of his calamity. You should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity.

You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives. You should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress. That's the sort of series of situations that are summed up here in verse 5. And this is the... that Obadiah reference is a useful interpretation.

Verse 5 is very interesting because it has a fascinating double reference to time. Where the Edomites were concerned, it was the final flowering of an ancient enmity in giving over the people of Israel to the power of the sword. But where Israel was concerned, it was the time of their final punishment.

We think of that epic history in Joshua through Kings, which set out the long history of Israel sinning and comes to the final punishment at the end, referring to 587. And so there's this heightened sense of time, double heightened sense of time that we've got in this reference to Edom and Israel in verse 5. And we go on to have that reference to the sword, gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword. This is going to result in bloodshed, especially in the area where Edom is concerned.

Bloodshed will pursue you in verse 6. Eventually, in verse 8, there will be those among the Edomites who will be killed by the sword. And so, we have the double reference to the sword in the accusation and then in the punishment that follows. And the Edomites will reap what they've sown.

I'm reminded of the saying of Jesus in Matthew 26 in verse 52. All who take the sword will perish by the sword. And this is what is said of the Edomites.

Verses 10 through 13 supply the next message. There's an accusation in verse 10, a short accusation again, followed by a long passage of judgment. And once again, because, followed by, therefore.

Because you said these two nations shall be mine, and we will take possession of them. And here is the boastful attitude. Once Judah was off the scene, there was this hope of occupying the whole territory that God's people had once occupied.

Not only the southern kingdom but also the northern kingdom was in a state of chaos at this time. This is their grandiose scheme. The historical background to this accusation is that Edom took advantage of so many of the Judeans, leaving their land to occupy the southern areas of Judah.

They moved from the south of the Dead Sea area and up into those southern areas of Judah. A substantial part of Judah was taken over by the Edomites. Here, it's put as a proposal that boastfully suggests that they hope to move into the old northern kingdom as well.

The Edomites held on to this territory. In Hellenistic times, that area in the south of the now small part of Judah was called Idumea. In 127 BC, the Jews conquered Idumea, forcibly converted its inhabitants to Jerusalem, and made all its males undergo circumcision.

Herod I, Herod the Great, king of Judea, was actually an Idumean Jew and not a native-born Israelite. The occupation of Israel's territory is featured both in verse 10 and in verse 12. In terms of this grandiose planning, the Lord has heard verse 12 say, all the abusive speech you uttered against the mountains of Israel saying; they are laid desolate, they are given us to devour.

And they got halfway in their plans to occupy the territory of God's people. But then, in verse 11, it says, although the Lord was there, and God had been there, and there's mention of God warranting his stepping in to deal with this situation. Because it says that Israel's God witnessed this occupation, the Lord was there, and he was present in his capacity as owner of that land.

It was his land that he'd given to Israel. And so, the Edomite claims to occupy the land were ultimately directed against God himself. And verse 13 makes that point.

You magnified yourselves against me, not against only Judah, but against me with your mouth. You multiplied your words against me, I heard it. And so, this warrants God's coming intervention against Edom.

And that is why punishment is promised here in verse 11. Then, verses 14 through 15 give the closing message. It echoes the desolation of Edom threatened in the first message in verses 3 and 4. And the particular accusation is the malicious joy of the Edomites over the sad experience of Judah.

Verse 15: as you rejoiced over the inheritance of the house of Israel because it was desolate, so I would deal with you. You shall be desolate. There's an interesting word here.

That word is inheritance. And it's an ominous word for the Edomites because God had given this territory to Israel to possess.

And Edom had no right to come poking their noses in and trying to take it over. And so, there's no way whereby the Edomites can eventually win. In fact, it's pointing onwards as we come to chapter 36.

It's talking about the mountains of Israel in verse 12. And my people Israel shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance. And so that word that was ominous for the Edomites in that message of punishment back at the end of 35, it was going to lead on.

It became actually a word of promise where Judah was concerned. There was that right to the land that Judah had in God's will, in God's purposes. And eventually that right would be re-established.

So, we can see, I think, that chapter 35 is really a message of assurance to the exiles. And as it spells out the reversal of what the Edomites had done and what the Edomites were doing, there is hope that the tables will be turned. But there's very much a sense of Judah's loss and Judah's humiliation.

There's a sensitive portrayal as it's spoken of at the hands of the Edomites. And so, we turn to chapter 36 and verses 1 through 15. The first thing we need to notice about it is that it has an important role in the overall structure of the book of Ezekiel.

It's addressed to the mountains of Israel. If we have good memories, we think back to chapter 6 of Ezekiel, which also was a message addressed to the mountains of Israel. But that was a pre-587 message.

And it spoke of judgment, of invasion, and trouble for those mountains of Israel. But now we're getting a reversal. Now, we're finding a promise and hope for those mountains of Israel.

And so, after that message of judgment in chapter 6, why was there judgment against the mountains of Israel in chapter 6? Well, it was the location of the high places, which not only rivaled the proper orthodox worship of God in the temple at Jerusalem but also was marked by the unorthodox features of image worship, incorporating religious images, a feature forbidden in the traditional faith of the Old Testament. And so God had to make the land desolate and waste. But that was then, and now we've moved on.

We've moved on beyond 587, and we're in the area of promise now. But 36:1 through 15, functions as a positive counterpart to chapter 6. And the mountains of Israel are once again rhetorically addressed by Ezekiel in far-off Babylon. The message was really meant to be heard by the exiles, of course.

Not simply now the prisoners of war of 597, but increased by the later influx of exiles after 587. In 6.3, Ezekiel brought his message not just to the mountains of Israel but to a larger entity, the mountains and the hills and the ravines and the valleys. And I suggested then that that was an emotional listing, and it made the Ezekiel and the exiles think back nostalgically.

To that beautiful land with all its geographical variety that they had loved and cherished so much. And there, of course, the listing was tarnished by the proliferation of those unorthodox high places. But here, in chapter 36, that grand listening occurs again.

I read it first in the New RSV: Thus says the Lord to the mountains and hills, the watercourses and the valleys, and then again in verse 6: The mountains and hills, the watercourses and the valleys. When you turn to the NIV, we have the same translation as we had in chapter 6, with a reference not to the watercourses but to the ravines.

In fact, the Hebrew word is the same as in chapter 6, and I suggest that there was another translator in 36 over against chapter 6, and there wasn't sufficient coordination because we're meant to hear a deliberate echo of what chapter 6 says. And so now there's this repetition. And now, that correspondence between chapters 6 and 36 obviously belonged to the first edition of the book of Ezekiel, which divided the book into two rough halves.

The prophet's pre-exilic negative messages before 587 and then his positive messages after 587 are divided neatly into roughly two halves. The second edition went on to incorporate positive messages back into the first half. It repeated, for instance, chapter 33 in both chapters 3 and 18.

And in chapter 16 it continued the denunciation of Jerusalem with a happier ending that belonged to the post-587 period. And in chapter 20 it did something rather

similar, and it added to that sad story of the exodus a promise of a great new exodus from Babylon to the homeland. And so, we have these two editions we have to reckon with in the book of Ezekiel.

But in this case the book has preserved the order of the first edition, and we have the promise of 36 in the second half corresponding to the threat of judgment back in chapter 6. We might ask, why wasn't 36, 1 to 15 added to chapter 6? It might have fitted quite nicely there and followed the pattern in chapters 16 and 20 of mixing old and new. Well, I suggest that the deliberate patterning and partnering of 36:1 through 15 with chapter 35 must have been a factor against simply combining 36 with chapter 6. The two sections stood as a double entity that couldn't be split up. And so, the first edition was kept here.

The message in 36, 1 through 15, falls into two parts: verses 1 through 12 and then 13 through 15. If we look first at verses 1 through 12, it starts with a long announcement of judgment against the nation's neighboring Judah in verses 1 through 7, and then it moves on and closes with a short announcement of salvation for the exiles in verses 8 through 12.

And so, 1 to 12 has two parts. In the theme, we're going back to the state of affairs that we had in chapter 35. And we have judgment again.

But not simply against Edom but including Edom. And in verse 5, when the judgment is spelled out, I'm speaking, says God, against the rest of the nations and against all Edom. And against all Edom.

So, there's this wider perspective now. But we are back in judgment against the nations and then moving on to the promise, positive promise to be given to Judah. And in this respect of starting with judgment and going on to salvation, and the salvation is obviously an important part, but the salvation has to deal with the problem, and that problem is set out in the preceding judgment.

In a way, that's rather like chapter 34, which began with a judgment against Judah's recent shepherd kings in 1 to 10 and then concluded with salvation in 11 to 16, saying that God is going to take over from his under-shepherds the role of shepherding, and he was going to do a much better job in shepherding his flock himself. But there's the same progression, looking back at a bad situation before going on to a much better situation. In this case, the message of judgment is longer than the promise of salvation.

Of course, for the exiles, it was really all the message of salvation, because in judging the bad things the neighboring nations had done, this brought consolation to the exiles themselves. It's assuring the exiles that God understands the exiles' pain. He knows what they've suffered at the hands of neighboring nations.

He knows their grief, he knows their reasonable grief, and he's going to deal with those responsible for it. And so, there's a message of empathy that comes out in this message of judgment. against Judah's national neighbors.

As we said in chapter 35, Edom was the sole target of coming reprisal, but in this case, there's this broader perspective, and Edom is mentioned along with this larger group in verse 5 of other nations. In chapter 25, we had that catalog of what neighboring Palestinians and states had done, their attitude, and their activity against Judah in 587. We should remember at this point, I have said it before, that grief often has two sides.

Grief over factual, material, and objective loss, and then grief over subjective humiliation, the loss of face, and so on. The feelings that come after the objective loss. You're still haunted by a feeling of subjective loss.

And we find in verses 1 to 7 that you get both aspects of grief being mentioned. In the first part of 3, we have the objective loss for Judah because they made you desolate indeed and crushed you from all sides so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations.

That was the objective loss in the first part of verse 3. But we find that where do we go from there? In fact, after that objective loss, the main focus of this message is humiliation. And that's being brought out again and again. And in verse 3, you became the object of gossip and slander among the people.

In verse 4, you not only became the source of plunder, that was an objective loss, but you became an object of derision to the rest of the nations all around. And so, there's going to be this concentration on this subjective loss. And it comes out in verse 5, with wholehearted joy and utter contempt, Edom took the land as their possession because of its pasture to plunder it.

This is a mixture of objective loss and subjective loss, but a focus is put on the subjective loss. And it comes out again in verse 6, doesn't it? You've suffered the insults of the nations. And so, there's an awareness that Judah has suffered in two ways: God's awareness, objective loss, and subsequent subjective loss.

And so, in fact, in verse 12, there's a sort of a disjointed catalogue of grievances that get piled up in a disorganized way. And that matches the course that grief often takes. It's often rambling, it's often disorganized, and we think of this aspect of grief that troubles us, we speak of that aspect of grief.

And there's a jumble in our minds as we grieve. And the wonderful truth of these verses is that God takes over this rambling mention, this combination of objective

grief coming back to it again and again, but even more the focus on the subjective grief, which again comes several times. And the fact that God is saying it is that God shares their emotional pain.

And how is God involved? There's a clue in verse 5. Because it wasn't only the land of the exiles that had been taken away, but in verse 5, Edom took my land as their possession. And so, God had his own grief, and God had his own objective grief. He lost his own land, or part of his own land, to the Edomites as they invaded a big portion of the southern part of Judah.

And so God is on their side; he's against them; he's their ally and friend. He's been through a similar experience, one might say. And he will not let them go on suffering in grief and in anguish.

So now we can turn to the positive message of verses 8 to 12. Those mountains of Israel are addressed again in verse 8, but now in a purely positive sense. Notice verse 8, especially.

But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches and yield your fruit to my people, Israel, for they shall soon come home. Notice the mountains are associated with my people. And the sense is that God's own people are going to go back to the land.

The land once promised and occupied by the Israelites that's going to happen once more. My people. And so that covenant term, my people, is associated now with the mountains of Israel.

And there's this strong promise, they shall soon come home. Now, historically it wasn't so easy as that. As a historical fact, it was going to be nearly 50 years before the first of the exiles started coming back to Judah in 538 BC.

And so quite a long way after Ezekiel's time. But he could say, in God's name, they shall soon come home. And this reminds me of the book of Revelation.

Because it begins and ends with the promise of the second advent as going to come in the time of the readers, the first readers. And the exalted Christ says, surely, I am coming soon. We know that we have had to wait many centuries, and it hasn't happened yet.

But in both cases, in the case of Ezekiel and in the case of the book of Revelation, spiritual reassurance is more important than the chronological disparity between the giving of the promise as soon as the actual happening. Verses 9 through 11 take a leaf out of the covenant blessings of Leviticus 26. We've seen as we've been going through, Leviticus 26 was well remembered by this priest prophet Ezekiel.

And he's woven in the curses of Leviticus 26, but now he can move on to the blessings of Leviticus 26. And in verse 10, I will multiply your population. It comes straight from Leviticus 26:9, I will multiply you.

But there's a striking difference between the context of Leviticus 26 and its promise of blessing and what we have here in this present situation in Ezekiel 36. Because in Leviticus 26, such a promise comes on the heels of covenant obedience. If you obey me, then great blessings are going to be yours.

Here, of course, it follows on the heels of Israel's great disobedience, which had been set out in the preceding chapters. And the issue of obedience in Ezekiel will only be set out as a future necessity and a future practicality. That's going to emerge in the next section, which will begin in 36.16. However, those covenant promises that depend on obedience have here become words of pure grace that do not look back to previous obedience on the exile's part, but implicitly, they do look forward to future commitment on Israel's part.

And we get that word... There was a message of possession earlier on, earlier in chapter 36. 36.2 and 5, you became the possession, the mountains of Israel became the possession of the rest of the Israelites. And then, the Edomites took the land as their possession.

And over against that, over against that, we get the verb possess in verse 12 used of Israel. My people, Israel shall possess you, the mountains of Israel. So, there should be a turning of those tables.

And you shall be their inheritance. And the word of promise was picked up from the end of chapter 35 and verse 15. Alright.

And then, too, in verse 12, we have that beautiful phrase, my people Israel. And that, in fact, is repeated in verse 8, my people Israel. And so, this promise of salvation picks up this covenant term, my people Israel, in a lovely way.

And then, in 36 verses 1 through 15, the plural U referring to the mountains, it changes to a singular U from verse 13 onwards, presumably agreeing with the land. The land of Israel, which is implied by the mountains of Israel. And now and then has occurred earlier in chapter 36.

And it, well in fact it was mentioned in verse 6, the land of Israel. Now the land of Israel is addressed. But there was a problem that had to be dealt with.

And it was a problem in the minds of the exiles. And there was a snag about talking about going back to Israel. And that snag related to an old stigma that belonged to the land.

And it gets mentioned, in fact, at the end of verse 12. No longer shall you, mountains of Israel, bereave them of children. And this goes back, in fact, to number 13.

It picks up numbers 13 and verse 22. And, no it's 32. Numbers 13 and verse 32.

And let's get this reference right. Because there, there's talk of the land bereaving its children. No, it's devouring, it is in 32.

And those spies that went to scout out the land, they came back and most of them had an unfavorable report. I don't think we should go into the promised land after all. And they say in 31, we're not able to go up against this people for they are stronger than we.

So, they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report that they'd spied out, saying, the land that we've gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants. And there's this feeling that if we go into the land, we're going to get devoured. And here, the exiles are evidently picking up on that old text.

And they're thinking back to the first entry into the promised land. And they're thinking back to the old stigma, oh, shall we go in? The people who are there are so great and powerful. And how are we going to stand against them? We're going to end up being destroyed.

And so, this is the thought that's being picked up here. No longer shall you bereave them of children. And this is what's developed in 13 through 15.

Thus says the Lord, because they say to you, because the exiles say, you devour people, and you bereave your nations of children. This is what the land does, and it devours people. And that's the actual verb that was used in Numbers 13 and verse 32.

And you bereave your nations of children. And so, do we want to go back to the land? That could happen all over again. Well, therefore, you, the land of Israel, shall no longer devour people and no longer bereave your nation.

And I will no longer let you hear the insults of the nations. No longer shall you bear the disgrace of the people. No longer shall you cause your nation to stumble, says the Lord God.

And so, the bad reputation that the land had in ancient times with the thought of going to the land, this is picked up here. And there's this fear it's going to happen all over again. Because it had happened recently.

That military slaughter at the hands of the Babylonians and their allies. And the death of many, including many children, from starvation during the siege. Lamentations makes a great deal of that.

The fact that children had starved because there wasn't enough food. And they weren't strong enough to cope in the very little bit of food that was available that the adults could. And so that old slur had proved to be tragically true in the experience of 587.

But here, God formally cancels it. And says that's not going to happen again. And there's this picking up of that emotional concern that the exiles had.

And there is this empathy that God has through Ezekiel of the way that they're feeling. Then, this empathy comes out with a mention at the end of verse 15. I will no longer let you hear the insults of the nations.

No longer shall you bear the disgrace of the people. And apart from that objective suffering, there had been that subjective suffering—that humiliation of being a defeated people.

But now the nations have something positive to look forward to, something that can replace their looking back in sorrow. Next time, we shall move on to the next part of chapter 36, verses 16 through 38.

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