

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 8, Fall and Rise of the Monarchy, Ezekiel 17:1-24 and 19:1-14

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen and his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 8, Fall and Rise of the Monarchy, Ezekiel 17:1-24 and 19:1-14.

We come now virtually to the end of the second part of the book of Ezekiel, which extends from chapter 8 down to chapter 19.

But as we look at chapters 17 through 19, we find there an illustration of the literary complexity of the material. So often the order of messages strike us with wonderment that needs to be explained because chapter 17 and 19 deal with the monarchy. But if you look at chapter 18, it goes off on a tangent.

And you think, what on earth has this to do with 17 and 19, which are obviously a pair of chapters? And then, too, while 17:1 to 27 and chapter 19 deal with the monarchy in a negative way, saying the monarchy is bad, 17:22 to 24 surprises us by treating it positively in terms of hope and promise. The overall literary unit does appear to be chapters 17 to 19. There does seem to be an intentional putting together of those chapters.

In the next lecture, we will see how chapter 18 fits in. But it's going to be easier for us at the moment to look at the two ends, the two bookends of this section, and the central theme, the single theme of monarchy there. Yet, of course, we still have to cope with the change of mood in the middle of 17:22 to 24.

But by now, we can recognize it as evidence of a second edition of the book of Ezekiel. And it definitely seems to have a role in the second part of Ezekiel's prophesying ministry. And it belongs after 587.

And its language and overall attitude have that positive theme and aspect that we associate with post-587 messages. For post-587 hearers and readers, this section can continue the story of Davidic kingship into a positive future after the condemnation that kingship had to receive in the earlier part of chapter 17 and chapter 19. The Old Testament has two attitudes towards kingship.

Theologically, it is of God. It's God's chosen constitution for Israel. Historically, it turned out to be bad.

The history of the monarchy is a history of failure in the Old Testament. Some of the prophets, especially Isaiah, could integrate these two contrasts, good theologically, bad historically. Isaiah especially could integrate these two contrasts and some other

prophets too by moving from the tragedy of the bad monarchy in their own times to the hope of a new period of kingship that would live up to its original ideals.

And Ezekiel picks up and can inherit this double message. But in this section, he spends more time on the bad old monarchy in 17:21 to 21 and in chapter 19 before adding a short piece about a good new monarchy in 17:22 to 24. When we come to the chapters in the 30s and 40s, we shall find more about kingship, in fact, from a good point of view.

The first part of chapter 17, where the message is concerned, comes in verses 3 to 10. As verse 2 indicates, it talks about the monarchy through metaphors. Metaphors that will be explained, in fact, in verses 11 through 21.

Verse 3 speaks of a great eagle with great wings and long pinions that came to Lebanon and so on. It goes through this metaphor at great length and extended metaphor until verse 10. And then we get an explanation from verses 11 through 21, a long explanation in historical terms.

It will be helpful, in fact, to start with the interpretation because we probably don't know much about the history, to see how this metaphor is interpreted, and then to go back and restate it in terms of the metaphor. Of course, using metaphors is a rhetorical ploy. Preachers in every age have used it to give an illustration for their message so that their message can be better understood.

Ezekiel was very good at it. But I suspect that his early readers and hearers knew much more about the historical side of the last days of the monarchy than we do. So, the interpretation itself is hard for us, and we have to struggle through that.

Then, we can see how it's put into metaphorical language. Verse 11, then, we have this introductory formula: the word of the Lord came to me, and then, say now to the rebellious house, do you not know what these things mean? Well, we don't know yet because we haven't read it. But it's called a rebellious house.

The interesting thing is that this is linked with monarchy, with kingship. The rebellious house are the people of Judah, whether in exile or in the homeland.

But it's linked with kingship. And kingship is representative of the whole community. And we came across this notion in chapter 12.

Because there, in verse 9 of chapter 12, mortal has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, what are you doing? Say to them, thus says the Lord God, this oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem and all the house of Israel in it. And so there's that linking up with the rebellious house. And then it's sort of prototype, its center, its summary, and its symbol in the actual king.

And this is happening here, the king very much represents the nation as a whole. The rebellious house comes to a head in the king, in the Judean king. And so, kingship comes to the fore as a factor that was to lead to Judah's downfall.

And obviously, the king led the government, and the government directed national policy. And so the king at the head of all this had a vital role. And he's part of the rebellion against God, that God's people as a whole is demonstrated to in various ways.

Then it gives the history, which is so well-known to the first hearers but not so well known to us. And verse 12 is reminding the prisoners of war of what they know only too well. The king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took its king and its officials and brought them back with him to Babylon.

And this is the 597 exile, the first deportation in this case of the elite from Jerusalem, government officials, important priests, and so on, that Ezekiel himself was dragged into and involved in. And so, in 597, Nebuchadnezzar deported young king Jehoiachin to Babylon and part of the, and replaced him with his own nominee, Zedekiah. In verse 13, he took one of the royal offspring, one of the royal seeds, and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath.

This is Zedekiah, who turned out to be the last king of Judah, though he didn't know it at the time. He was a vassal king. He was part of the royal offspring or seed because he was actually a member of the Davidic royal family.

He was really Jehoiachin's uncle, an older man who was thought to be compliant enough to be a faithful vassal of Nebuchadnezzar. And so, there's that replacement. And so, there's a new family member of the Davidic dynasty, but the dynasty continues in Zedekiah.

And a fresh treaty was made between the Babylonian overlord and his new vassal. He put him under oath so that the kingdom might be humbled and not lift itself up. And that in keeping his covenant, it might not stand.

There was a treaty, in other words, a vassal treaty, between Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar. It was understood that Zedekiah would be the lower partner, the subordinate partner, and had to do what Nebuchadnezzar wanted. And it was. The covenant was made, the treaty was made, and ancient treaties were sealed with an oath, an oath of allegiance.

And this is mentioned even in verse 13, putting him under oath. Now, one needs to know that when these treaties were made, there were curses that accompanied these treaties as part of them. And these treaties would be given a religious flavor.

And the vassal king would seal these curses, as it were, by promising in the name of the God of Israel, Yahweh, that he would keep his promises and be loyal to Nebuchadnezzar. Now remember that because that's a very important point as this message goes on. Now, it's one thing to make an oath of allegiance and be determined to do it and perhaps keep it for a few years.

But Judah had a long history of political rebellion. No one liked to be under a colonial power, and this was certainly true of Judah at the southwest border of the Babylonian Empire.

And so, this imperial treaty, this imperial yoke was resented. And there was pressure on Zedekiah to make overtures to Egypt, who was another great power, national power. Would Egypt send troops to come and break the stranglehold of Babylon? And, and so with assurances from Egypt, Zedekiah felt free to rebel politically against Nebuchadnezzar.

In fact, while the siege of Jerusalem was taking place, we're told in the book of Jeremiah that envoys were sent to Egypt; come on, send your army. We're expecting your army. And an army came from Egypt.

For a short while, just for a short while, the Babylonian army broke off its siege and had to go to the southwest of Judah to defeat the Egyptian army. And defeat it, it did. And so, the Babylonians came back and carried on with their siege of Jerusalem.

But of course, not only had Babylon been rebelled against, which was the reason why there was an invasion from Babylon into Judah in the first place, but there was this fresh evidence of appealing to Egypt to get Zedekiah and Judah out of the mess it had fallen into. And so pretty obviously, Zedekiah had broken his oath he'd made in the name of Yahweh. And this is taken very seriously here.

And at this point, where are we historically? Well, verse 15, he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar by sending ambassadors to Egypt in order that they might give him horses and a large army. Well, probably this is before ever the siege took place. Will he succeed? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant? Can he break the treaty, the political treaty, and yet live? This is not the theological covenant with Yahweh.

This is the political covenant with Nebuchadnezzar. As I live, says the Lord God, 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. Pharaoh, with his mighty army and great company, will not help him in war, when ramps are cast up and siege wars built to cut off many lives.

And so, it's looking ahead and prophesying, yes, Egypt may well send an army, but it won't prevail against the siege of Jerusalem, which is still regarded as the future at this point. Because he despised the oath and broke the covenant, because he gave his hand and yet did all these things, he shall not escape. He was taking God's word, God's name in vain.

He promised on the Bible, as it were, he promised by Yahweh that he would be faithful to Nebuchadnezzar, and he should have held to that promise. And it became, in fact, a sin. Ironically, it became a sin that he had broken this political treaty.

It's rather fascinating that if we read the account in 2 Chronicles of this happening, we find that there's a leaning on Ezekiel 17. King says nothing about this, but Chronicles evidently read his Ezekiel, and he knew this. So listen to what the chronicler said in chapter 36 and verse 13.

Zedekiah also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. There we are, bringing in the message of this article here at the beginning of chapter 17. And so, there's that fascinating secondary use of Ezekiel there in that later book of Chronicles, in fact.

But there's the message, you can't take God's name in vain with impunity. And so Zedekiah would be deported having seen the failure of his army in fighting the Babylonians. Now this is interesting because this first message in chapter 17, it does link up with chapter 12.

We read of the link between the rebellious house and that thought of exile, go into exile there in chapter 12. It pinpoints the king as having a necessary place among the exiles. And it gives quite a bit of material on the king being defeated and being sent into exile along with his subjects.

And so, this first message repeats the message of Zedekiah's deportation in chapter 12 and supplies a good reason for it. We didn't have a reason for it in 7 apart from rebellious house, but now the political background is being given. So that's where we are.

Now, we go back to the metaphor. Now we know as much as God's first heroes through Ezekiel know. And we can see what the metaphor is saying.

Verses 3 to 10 are an extended metaphor. It's a dressing up of these future facts in a story, an illustration. Now we can see that the great eagle that comes to Lebanon is, in fact, Nebuchadnezzar that comes to Jerusalem.

And the cedar—the eagle took the top of the cedar and broke off his topmost shoot. This, in fact, is the existing king, the young king who reigned for only three months.

Jehoiakim, the 18-year-old king, was taken to Babylon. Babylon is described as a land of trade and a city of merchants.

It was a commercial metropolis. And so Jehoiakim is taken off to that great city. And then, in verse 5, the eagle took a seed from the land and placed it in fertile soil, a plant by abundant waters.

He set it like a willow twig. And so, this seed is actually part of the royal family, the royal offspring, the royal seed. It's another member of the royal family, which and in fact, it's that last king Zedekiah, which he makes king of Judah instead.

And things go well for a while in this new kingship. And we know it's as long as Zedekiah was loyal to Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 16, it sprouted and became a vine spreading out but low.

Its branches turned towards him; its roots remained turned towards him, turned towards Nebuchadnezzar, and so favored him and supported him. Its roots remain where it stood. So, it became a vine.

It brought forth branches, put forth foliage. And so that's where we are in the so far in the early reign of Zedekiah, who's been chosen to replace Jehoiakim. And his reign prospered as long as he was faithful to Zedekiah.

But Zedekiah had other ideas. His eyes gravitated towards another eagle, a rival eagle—in fact, the Egyptian pharaoh.

And he plans to link himself up with Egypt and get shot of the Babylonian yoke. He hopes to find new resources to his own advantage. And in verse seven, we come to this: there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage.

And see, this vine stretched out its roots towards him, towards Pharaoh, so that he might water it from the bed where it was planted. It was transplanted to good soil by abundant water so it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine. But God cast doubt on this new arrangement in verse nine, says, say, thus says the Lord God, will it prosper, this new arrangement with Egypt? 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 when it's transplanted into Egyptian allegiance.

Will it thrive when the east wind strikes it? Will it not utterly wither, wither on the bed where it grew? So, these are searching questions. And, of course, that east wind, that's the Babylonian army, which is going to come and put paid to the whole business. So, there we are.

There's that extended metaphor in terms of birds and plants telling that story. And I wonder if the first here is knew what it meant or whether they needed the interpretation, historical interpretation of Bacchida. Oh, we see what it was.

But at least it was intriguing. And at least it aroused their curiosity. What's he talking about? What's this? What's the eagle? What's the vine? What is it? And this turn of events, obviously, falling on hard times.

It's the old story, the old, old story in that gospel of bad news that Ezekiel had first to bring that Jerusalem was going to fall and the monarchy with it. And so overall, the prisoners of war who were the heroes were animated by a false hope that they would return to Jerusalem and live in the relative stability that they'd enjoyed before. A stability that depended not only on Jerusalem, but on the monarchy.

The monarchy was very important. Well, it wouldn't be its protective agency, in fact. And this hope is struck down in 1 through 21, first through metaphor and then through plain interpretation.

There's a parallel text in Lamentations. Lamentations chapter 4. At the end of Lamentations, the people, this is about the people who were left in the land after the exile and were never exiled. And they're meditating on their past history and what they're going through now.

Life certainly isn't easy. And one of the things that they say in 420, it speaks of the capture of Zedekiah. And that spelled the end of everything.

The Lord's anointed, the breath of our life was taken in their pits. The one of whom we said under his shadow, we shall live among the nations. And there it is, this expression of hope but eventual disappointment.

This is very much a parallel text to what we've been studying here. Anyway, we move on to 22 to 24, which has a very different new installment for the royal story. We know that after 587, Ezekiel was entrusted with a new message of hope, which we're going to be turning to before very long.

But that hope could only follow the destruction and not replace it. And so it's fitting that inserted here is part of those post 587 messages. And there's this thematic link, this identical theme of monarchy, but now it represents a turning of the tide and the restoration of monarchy.

But this time it will be very much blessed by God. And so, we come to 22 to 24. And this is like a sort of royal postscript to those earlier verses.

Now, Ezekiel could add his own voice to other prophetic messages of hope concerning the royal dynasty, especially in Isaiah 9 and 11 and Jeremiah 23. In verse 3, Nebuchadnezzar had taken charge of the cedar shoot, that Judean king, who was actually Jehoiachin. But when we come to verse 22, we pick up on this notion, but there's a difference.

God himself is in control now. God himself takes over this role and installs a new king in Israel. In a sense, this will be a vassal king, but the overlord will now be God himself.

And so, a change in the new administration, a very definite change. God is in charge now from the very start. And then that shoot would take root and grow in prosperity and enjoy worldwide rule.

And so, it goes on into verse 23. Then, the world would be forced to acknowledge the providential sovereignty of Israel's God in human affairs. Verse 24: all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree. God is providential in world affairs. And he's going to prove it.

This is going to be a specimen, a proof when the Davidic monarchy is restored and blessed in this way. And of course, here, when we think more canonically of the Old Testament, there's a picking up of the Royal Psalms, like Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, that promise universal rule to God's chosen king of David's line. And Ezekiel is saying, one day, it's going to come true.

One day it will. And so there's this happy ending to this, what previously had been a very sad story of the Davidic monarchy. We move on to chapter 19.

We're leaving out 18 for our next lecture. Once again, we have the same monarchical theme, and Davidic kingship is in view. This aligns very much with the first half of chapter 17, that message of judgment in metaphor and plain language concerning Zedekiah.

This, too, in chapter 19, is a message of judgment against Judah's monarchy, in fact, against Zedekiah, who is the last king. And these messages in 17 and 19, these negative messages, are both like nails that Ezekiel hammers into the coffin of the exile's vain hopes of an early return to Judah and to the status quo Davidic king and all. We noticed just now that 17:22 through 24 breaks the negativity and moves ahead to a positive future of the institution of monarchy.

It's one of the post-judgment promises in the Old Testament prophets, promises that fostered a sort of messianic view of God's future dealings with Israel. And these are

promises that the New Testament latched onto in its own claim that Jesus is the Messiah. But we might ask why that positive message in 17:22 to 24 wasn't put after chapter 19.

That would make it more logical: get rid of the negative stuff first of all, and then we can move on to the positive stuff. And it seems rather strange that we've got this down and up and down relationship between 17 and 19. And the reason is that in content, 17:22 to 24 was designed as a positive supplement to 17:1 to 21.

And you've got the same sort of metaphors used in that latter half of 17 as you had in the earlier half. And so, it was meant to be there, having the same overall metaphor. It's true that if you were to examine 17:22 to 24, it has an awareness of chapter 19, but mostly its language is an echo of the earlier message, the negative message in 17:1 to 21.

And so, it fits better at the end of 17 than it would in 19. But chapter 19 is strictly a literary continuation of 17:1 to 21. And I suspect in the first edition that was so.

It was in the second edition of the book of Ezekiel that first of all we have inserted 17:21 to 24, and then we have inserted chapter 18. But we shall come to that latter point of view next time. Chapter 19 we could call an oracle of judgment.

And that is true. That is very true in its content. But it's not what it calls itself.

If we look at verse 1, as for you, raise up a lamentation for the princes of Israel. And this comes over as a lamentation. And then, at the end of the chapter, verse 14 of chapter 19, it says, this is a lamentation, and it is used as a lamentation.

And so there we are. It's a lamentation. But we need to know that sometimes the prophets, the Old Testament prophets, used various forms in their messages.

And sometimes, they conveyed the message of an oracle of judgment through a lament. This is a funeral lament, in fact, that one would use when somebody had died or when one had undergone a terrible tragedy. And so, this is actually, from a foreign point of view, it's a lament, a funeral lament that mourned the loss, especially of a member of the family, perhaps, who had died.

And we may know there's one very good and long example of a funeral lament in its own right, not used by a prophet, but as a funeral lament in 2 Samuel and Chapter 1. And there David laments over his king, whom he'd always been loyal to, King Saul, and over the crown prince, Jonathan, who both died at the hands of the Philistines. And in the second half of 2 Samuel, chapter 1, we read this lament and it has a refrain running through it, how the mighty have fallen. And this is said in tones of

mourning, how terrible it is that these heroes, these mighty heroes, have fallen in the midst of the battle.

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war have perished. Those two were as good as weapons, but now they've died, and we've lost the weapons of war. Well, that's a real lamentation, but there's this other use of a lamentation to convey the message of an oracle of judgment.

And an oracle of judgment really consisted of a, no, yes, what do I want to say? There was the content of a lamentation, a backward-looking back, a looking back to the dead person's achievements in his lifetime. But what the oracle of judgment did, that used the lamentation, they used it as a forecast of coming doom. And so, what was strictly in the past in a lamentation now becomes, as it's reused prophetically, as a forecast of future doom.

It takes a position beyond the coming doom, as it were. It looks back at the tragedy and mourns it as if it's already happened. And so that's how it works. This message, too, has a metaphor, but it subordinates metaphor to lament.

We notice that there are two separate metaphors. As we glance through chapter 19, there's one based on lions in verses two to nine. And then, it seems to start again with a different metaphor.

It uses the metaphor of a vine from verses 10 onwards, 10 through 14. And so, two separate metaphors, but both within the confines of a lament. And that difference shows that there are actually two laments here that form a pair.

And both of them united with the theme of monarchy. In verse two, what a lioness was your mother among lions. And this is this singular, you here must actually be the last king of Judah, Zedekiah.

The mother or the lioness is the Davidic dynasty, which had produced kings generation after generation. And he's the one who's rhetorically addressed, of course, the real heroes of the prisoners of war, who've been in Babylon since 597. And this lioness, this dynasty had produced successive generation of kings.

In chapter 19, we don't have the plain interpretation we have in 17. But we get this interspersing with reality. And so, in verse four, we get a king who's brought to Egypt.

And this, of course, was Jehoahaz, who was not the former king, but the king before that in Judah, who was replaced by Jehoiachin, by Pharaoh, and then Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah. But it's going through the history of the

monarchy over the last three generations of kings. And the Pharaoh deported him to Egypt.

And another of the cubs, the young lion cubs, was appointed to be king, and that was Jehoiachin. Okay. But in point of fact, from verse five, we seem to move ahead.

It's not Jehoiachin. If you look at the commentaries, there's some discussion and uncertainty as to which king is which. But one can make out a good case that we have already come; we flash forward to Zedekiah.

And that's another of her cubs that the dynasty chooses to make the young lion, the new king of Judah, Zedekiah. And so, one goes on. And he reigned from 597 to 587.

And it soon moves this message to the final attack from Nebuchadnezzar's army. And it was an international army with elements from the various vassal states. And so, in verse eight, the nation set upon him from the provinces all around.

They spread their net over him. He was caught in their pit. He was brought to the king of Babylon.

So, his voice should be heard no more. And this is the final king, the last king. And never more will Zedekiah's voice, that last king, never again will the Davidic monarch have his voice heard on the mountains of Israel.

So that's the sad story there, the negative story. But then we come to this parallel message, this parallel lament, which changes the metaphor to a vine. And its strongest stem became a ruler's scepter.

And this is Zedekiah ruling in all his power for a while. But it was plucked up in fury and cast down to the ground. The east wind dried it up.

It was transplanted into the wilderness. And so we're telling the story of Zedekiah again, which we heard earlier in the first part of chapter 17. And fire has gone out from its stem, has consumed its branches and fruit.

So there remains in it no strong stem, no scepter for ruling. The fire of destruction over Jerusalem, even the palace engulfed in its flames. And so, no king, no monarchy anymore.

And so, that's the sad story told once more in metaphorical terms, again, of the end of this royal line. But there's a last sentence in chapter 19. This is a lamentation and it is used as a lamentation.

And I think that this functions as an editorial conclusion that looked back, way back, way after the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the monarchy. In my commentary, I've translated it a little bit differently. I render this as a lament, and it has come to function as a lament.

Now that's different. A lament, a prophetic lament, okay, looking forward. But now it's happened and we can look back and it's actually come true.

And for us, we are saddened as we're looking back. So, you've got those past tenses in chapter 19, really referring to future events, but really, it refers back to what's going to happen. It's a prediction of what is going to happen, but now it has happened.

And so, it's a real lament now. And we all grieve over the loss of that monarchy. So that's chapters 17 and 19.

And next time we'll go back to that middle chapter in 18 and try to see how it fits in to that royal framework, though it says nothing about kingship within chapter 18.

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