

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 10, Exodus Old and New, Ezekiel 20:1-44

© 2024 Leslie Allen and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 10, Part 3, Exodus Old and New, Ezekiel 20:1-44.

Now we will be considering chapter 20 of Ezekiel, and in so doing, we are moving on to a new major part of the book, which consists, I think, of chapters 20 through 24.

When we looked at the other two parts, we saw that there was a comprehensive structure that went with them, a structural framework, as shown in chapters 1 through 7 and 8 to 19. We had a date, a vision, symbolic actions, and messages. Here, we have part of that structuring.

We do have a new date in chapter 20 and verse 1, and we don't have another vision, but what we do have is a visit from the elders, such as we had in chapter 8 at the beginning of the second part of the book. Then, we have a series of messages until the end of chapter 24, though we should also note that incorporated in these messages are references to symbolic actions in 21 through 24. So, there's some attempt, one might say, at following that framework, but it's not completely followed through.

The date works out in our chronology as August 591 BC, and we've moved on because in chapter 1, it was July 593, and then it was September 592 in chapter 8. The deportation of the elite citizens of Jerusalem who came to Babylon in 597 now lasted six long years, and we find that the elders come once again, and as I said in chapter 8, there seems to be self-government in the labor camps, and these Judean elders seem to run the camp, and they come to Ezekiel acknowledging evidently his prophetic authority, and they come to consult him presumably hoping for good news about going home. They've been in exile for so long now. And Ezekiel is giving his reply in verses 3 to 31.

But before we look at this first message, it might be useful to glance at the second one that comes in 32 down through 44. And that does speak about the return to the land. As we noticed before in earlier texts, this latter message looks like a second edition addition, a second edition addition in which Ezekiel supplemented, in this case, the message that was concerned with the exodus, his first message. He supplements it with a new message, and now it's an affirmative message after the negative message of the first message, the first one.

And so, the date in verse 1 relates to the first message, and if we want to know when the second one occurred, all we can say is it was after 587, evidently. But it's very

much a thematic joining together by putting together the negative message about the exodus to a new positive message concerning the exodus again. We recall that, in chapter 14, the elders came to consult Ezekiel, and God refused a favorable consultation on the grounds that the elders also practiced pagan religion.

We were told that in 14.3. Instead of giving the message they wanted, there was a call for repentance in 14.6. Similarly, in a way, here, Ezekiel is eventually told by God to accuse the elders of pagan practices, so a favorable message is ruled out. We can glance at the end of the first message in chapters 30 and 31. Therefore, say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God, will you defile yourselves after the manner of your ancestors and go astray after their detestable things? When you offer your gifts and make your children pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols for this day.

And shall I be consulted by you, O house of Israel? As I live, says the Lord God, I will not be consulted by you. And so that's the answer. No, I'm not going to give you a message.

But from another point of view, Ezekiel is given a message, and there's that long preamble to the no explaining why you can't get the message you want. And it goes back to the Exodus, the great theme of the Exodus. And we might think, well, what a positive theme.

How marvelous. The Exodus runs throughout the Old Testament as something wonderful and is the spiritual foundation for all of Israel's relationship with God. Ezekiel also gives a history lesson about the Exodus, but it's not the history lesson that these elders would have learned in its school.

It's a very different one. As I said, the Exodus was a foundational event in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, Israel's God is characteristically defined as the God who brought Israel out of Egypt.

Just as in the New Testament, the Christian God is described as the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Like the resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament, in the Old Testament, the Exodus from Egypt is the basic evidence that justifies and prompts faith in God. Every year, we remember the Exodus, which was celebrated at a festival, a celebration of Passover.

In early Judaism, it was laid down that every Jew who celebrated the Passover, as he did so, must regard himself as having participated personally in the Exodus. He was to project himself back in his heart and say, this avails for me, this Exodus event. In the annual Passover, every Israelite embraced the Exodus as the vital beginning and basis of Israelite faith.

And there's a nice text after the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14 and verse 31. So that Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. And every generation of Judeans and Israelites thereafter, because of the Exodus, feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

All right, the Exodus event actually divides into a complex of happenings. And there's a series starting with the initial Exodus from Egypt and then traveling through the wilderness and finally being brought into the land, the Promised Land. And often the Old Testament speaks not of being brought out of Egypt, but being brought up from Egypt.

And that latter verb puts the focus on the end, the beginning and the end, Egypt and then the Promised Land. And so, as you think of the Exodus, you automatically think of the complex, yes, through the wilderness, yes, the final point was coming into the land. And so, this language, especially of bringing up, embraces nicely the three elements of the Exodus tradition.

And in fact, just to speak of the Exodus, you think of the whole cycle there. That third element is especially important here because it focuses on the land, the land that the deportees had lost. Israel's traditional faith claimed the privilege to live in the land on the basis of the Exodus.

And this faith must have given hope to the first group of exiles that Ezekiel is speaking to here through their representatives of their governing elders. But Ezekiel re-examines that Exodus tradition, and he finds no support for such a hope. It must have been a very shocking message for these elders to receive.

And we can compare Ezekiel's message in the first half of chapter 16. There, he tore apart another great tradition of faith and hope that the people of Judah had. The role of Jerusalem as the city of God, ever under God's protective care.

Think again, Ezekiel said there. There were good reasons for the exiles abandoning such a faith and such a hope. And now Ezekiel, in God's name, puts the great Exodus tradition under his microscope.

He analyzes it and finds a deep-seated faithlessness on Israel's part. He deconstructs the so-called wonderful complex of events, and he finds naught for the elder's comfort. Instead, he finds in it every justification for the exile of God's people from the land.

A thoroughgoing exile, worse than just the deportation of Jerusalem's elite that the elders represented. So, Ezekiel turns the conventional view of the Exodus upside

down. Just as in chapter 16, he overturned the value of Jerusalem as an unalterable basis of faith and hope.

The value of the Exodus theme, apart from Ezekiel 20, is to characterize Israel's God as a God of grace for Israel. And this is an element within chapter 20, but there's so much more. The Exodus started his relationship with them as he meant to carry on.

And for the five, nine, and seven exiles, it had the added value of making the land of Israel an essential part of that grace. God had given them the land, so there would be every expectation that he would send them back. Land and people went together as a divinely ordained favor, like love and marriage in the old song, horse and carriage.

So, land and people went together. Not so fast, says Ezekiel, in God's name. There's a big obstacle that looms large in every episode of the Exodus story.

It throws a wrench into the exile's expectations. Step by step, he retraces each episode in the story as a whole. Where his audience saw a smooth reflection of God's perennial goodwill, Ezekiel saw dark cracks and crevices that told another story, a repeated story of Israel's willfulness and disobedience.

There was naught for the comfort of the elders. And so, we start this restructuring of the Exodus tradition in verses five through nine. This starts with the people staying in Egypt.

In the book of Exodus, there's a simple portrayal of the Israelites as victims, just victims, oppressed by the Egyptians. Nothing in the book of Exodus shows them in a bad light at this stage. But, as we read on in the Old Testament, when we come to the book of Joshua, in one of Joshua's speeches, what does he say? And I'm referring you now to Joshua chapter 24 and verse 14.

And there, Joshua challenges the people of God to put away the gods that their ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt. Put away the gods that your ancestors served in Egypt and served the Lord. If you're unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served or others in the region beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you're living.

But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. It's interesting, in that list of historical unfaithfulness, there's a mention of Egypt and unfaithfulness serving the gods of Egypt. And Ezekiel is seizing on this evidence, not in Exodus, but in Joshua, looking back.

Ezekiel picks up this other tradition and runs with it. There's another text in the book of Psalms. Psalm 106 is a post-Ecclesiastic Psalm that incorporates a number of Old Testament traditions.

It's later, evidently, than Ezekiel. It picks up this tradition, too. I think it picks up from Ezekiel 20, Psalm 106, and verse 7. Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wonderful works.

They did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but they rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea. But even in Egypt, this is happening, even in Egypt.

And he's picking up, the psalmist is picking up what Ezekiel is saying, who in turn depended on what Joshua had said. And it's true, yes, God had chosen Israel, verse 5 admits that, on the day when I chose Israel. Yes, there was such goodwill on God's part.

And that would be the choice; it's very much characteristic of the book of Deuteronomy. And so, yes, this is true. And he speaks of he would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land I searched out for them.

A land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. The word searched out, is used in the Exodus traditions for the spies who went to search out and scout the land. But now God applies it to himself as his prior search, looking for the best land in the world that he could find.

And that was where they were being headed. And so, and so, this is very much in accord with the tradition. But, in verse 7, I said to them, and this is in Egypt, cast away the detestable things your eyes fast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt, the idols of Egypt.

And so there we are, something wrong from the very start, even when they were in Egypt before they'd ever begun that trek through the wilderness on the way to the promised land. And, in fact, they refused. The Israelites in Egypt refused, Ezekiel goes on to say, but they rebelled against me and wouldn't listen to me.

Not one of them. Cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. And that presented a problem to God, and God almost gave up on them there and then, but he decided against it.

And verse 8 carries on, I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt, there and then. But I didn't. I acted for the sake of my name so that it wouldn't be profaned in the sight of the

nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them by bringing them out of the land of Egypt.

So, God carried on with these willful Israelites, willful from the very start, and the reason had nothing to do with them; it was just to protect his own name or reputation since the Egyptians knew of his intention to rescue his people from Egypt. And so it's for the sake of my name. The next episode occurs in verses 10 through 17.

It follows the traditional pattern, and sinfulness was already involved in this wilderness stage. It can now follow the traditional pattern of law-giving and law-breaking in the old wilderness stories. But the mention of law-breaking mentioned against that in verse 11: after I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness, verse 10, I gave them my statutes, showed them my ordinances, by whose observance everyone shall live.

And so, God made very plain what his new covenant standards were. And of course, Ezekiel here is coming back to the text that was so important for him in chapter 18, and it was Leviticus 18 and verse 5, you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances, by so doing you shall live. So, no excuse for the Israelites, it was made plain what the path to life was.

And here, the reminiscence of Leviticus 18:5, back in chapter 18, it was given an eschatological reference of future life in the land that they could look forward to. But here, now, it's a life of blessing; wherever the Israelites are, the blessing of life comes to them as they obey God's known will. In Paul, in Romans chapter 7, in verse 10, he calls these commands a commandment that promised life, a wilderness generation chose to do the other thing, and that generation never reached the promised land.

Ezekiel's laying stress on that, that those who left Egypt, apart from Joshua and Caleb, they never got to their wanted destination, but they died out in the wilderness. And it fell to the next generation to inherit the promise of the land. And verse 16, there's a reference to their heart going after their idols, and this seems to be a reference to the incident of the golden calf, the worship of the golden calf.

They should have died at this point, according to Leviticus 18:5, but the first wilderness generation didn't die there, and then they survived for a while, and they lived out their lives, their lifespan, but staying in the wilderness. It was a virtual death, it was a spiritual death in not attaining the promised land. And so, in 17, my eye spared them. And then verses 18 through 26 turn to the second wilderness generation.

For them, too, Leviticus 18:5 meant nothing. In verse 21, the children of the exodus generation rebelled against me. They did not follow my statutes and were not careful to observe my ordinances by whose observance everyone shall live. And so, Ezekiel

has got nothing good so far to say about the exodus tradition except on God's side, God's initial grace, God's initial choice, and sparing them, but even that was for the sake of God preserving a good reputation and not losing his reputation in the opinion of other nations.

So again, God spared them. But verse 23 is fascinating. And have we heard anything like this before in the Old Testament before, hitherto? Moreover, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries because they had not executed my ordinances but had rejected my statutes and profaned my Sabbaths and their eyes were set on their ancestors' idols.

God had exile in mind even in the wilderness in the lifetime of the second generation of Israelites coming out from the wilderness. Now, this is very radical and very shocking that here he envisions God passing a suspended sentence of exile that would eventually be Israel's fate. Well, where does this come from? Well, it's an interpretation of a verse in Exodus that doesn't specify the exile, but it's very ominous, and this is in Exodus chapter 32 and verse 34.

And there's the intercession that Moses makes on behalf of the people, and God grudgingly says okay, I'll let them go into the land, but I've still got something against them, against Israel. Nevertheless, in Exodus 32-34, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin. Ezekiel thinks of that great epic saga of Joshua through Kings, and he sees that punishment as, in fact, exile from the promised land.

They'll go into the land but they won't enjoy it forever. They will be driven out of the land. And so, this is a particular interpretation of that vague text.

It's reinterpreted in terms of an ultimate punishment of exile from the promised land. And once again Psalm 106 follows Ezekiel's lead and listen to what it says in verse 27. Psalm 106 and verse 27 read from verse 24.

Then they despised the promised land, having no faith in his promise. They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the voice of the Lord. Therefore, he raised his hand and swore to them that he would make them fall in the wilderness and would disperse their descendants among the nations scattering them over the lands.

The psalmist reads Ezekiel 20, and he uses the same interpretation of that vague text in Exodus 32-34. So, there we are. The understanding of both Ezekiel and the psalmist is that that sentence in Exodus 32 chased Israel down the corridors of time and overtook Judah not only in 597 but also climatically in 587 when Judah ceased to be a national state.

Chapter 18, a post-587 message, could speak of the ending of this transgenerational perspective because it had finally come true in God's long-term planning. But here in the first half of chapter 20, we haven't come to 587 yet, and this pre 587 message can hold it. It's still in force that transgenerational will of God that eventually, the Exodus culminates in exile.

But in verse 25, we have more and more shocks as we go through. Verse 25 it strikingly says that God also gave Israel laws that were not good. We go, oh my, where are those? And it's in verse 25 that he's there's mention of this.

Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. These laws were the reverse of Leviticus 18:5 and didn't bring a blessed life. What does it mean? Well, verse 26 casts a bit of light.

I defiled them through their very gifts in their offering up of their firstborn because there was child sacrifice. The firstborn, evidently in a very pagan way, had been being sacrificed to God. Well, we might look through the Pentateuch and say well I I don't see that there.

What does it mean here? Well, there was a law of the firstborn, and that was in Exodus 13 and verses 12 through 13. And it talks about the redemption of the firstborn of animals and they were to die. Yes, they were to die.

But the yes when the it's the firstborn sons that were to be redeemed with money and not killed but the firstborn animals were to be killed. And so it says actually if we look that verse up in Exodus 13 and verse 5, which sets out the ruling. Exodus 13 and verses 12 and 13.

You shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. Notice that verb we're going to come back to it to set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. And then there are two categories.

All the firstborn of your livestock that are male shall be the Lord's. Every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep. If you do not redeem it, you must break its neck.

But the implication is that as other animals were to be killed. But how about humans? Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. Pay a sum of money and not actually kill them.

And then there's a there's a reason given about in the Exodus story how God spared the firstborn. The firstborn of the Egyptians was killed, but not the firstborn of the Israelites. And so that's what the text itself wants to say.

But there's this setting apart to the Lord. And that's an interesting word because if we look back to the Hebrew text, we get that same verb again. That verb for set apart is the same as is used in the phrase for child sacrifice in verse 31.

When you offer your gifts and make your children pass through the fire, making your children pass through the fire refers to child sacrifice. And making to pass is the same as in the old Exodus text about setting apart to the Lord.

You could translate it, make it over, or turn it over in both stages. In the first case by redemption you make the child over to the Lord. Turn the child over to the Lord.

Acknowledge it belongs to God. And in the second case with child sacrifice you make the child over to a pagan God. Or you treat Yahweh as if he were a pagan God by indulging in child sacrifice.

And it may well be that the advocates for child sacrifice in ancient Israel capitalized on the double use of that verb. And they wrongly interpreted it as endorsing child sacrifice. Yeah, we're making over to God by fire sacrifice.

Yes, we're making it over to God, and we're supposed to be making it over to God, aren't we? Oh no, you're not. You're not supposed to. But God says, so be it. I let them do it.

I let them do it. And let me refer you to an interesting passage in Romans, in Romans chapter one because we find there that Paul is talking about wrong pagan practices.

And in Romans 1:24, God gave them up to their impurity. And then, in verse 26, God gave them up to degrading passions. And in verse 28, God gave them up to a debased mind and to the things that should not be done.

God gave those humans up to take the wrong route that would lead to inevitable judgment. It seems that this is the same thought that God permitted it to happen.

This is the meaning of Exodus 20: God gave those laws, but He allowed them to interpret them wrongly.

He gave them up to the wrong interpretation of those laws. And that seems to be a way in which we can think our way through the way that the text wants to think here. Now, all that Ezekiel has been saying is a preliminary to verses 30 and 31.

Because Ezekiel says there, you're just the same as your ancestors. You're just as bad as your ancestors in turning against God and in adopting pagan practices. And so there are these old genes that are showing you.

There's this bad blood, and so that's a reason why there could be no favorable message from God. So there we are, this long tirade saying no in very many verses, dragging down that Exodus tradition, and interpreting it in terms of where Israel has constantly gone wrong and has been storing up judgment for themselves, which really pointed forward to the destruction of 587.

Then we come to the second half, 32 through 44. The theme is the Exodus, but now it has a different message. And there's this thematic supplementing, I think, with a post-587 message here.

This message continues the Exodus theme of the earlier message but is really part of the second edition. That tragic judgment of 587 lies between verses 31 and 32. But the theme of the Exodus continues, but now with a large measure of positive interpretation.

It's not completely positive, but there is a large measure of positive interpretation. The God of the Exodus is going to work that miracle again. Now you're looking back positively at the Exodus, and your Ezekiel is taking a stand along with the old tradition.

But he was using it as a type or analogy of what God is going to do. There's going to be a second Exodus, and God is going to work that miracle again, with the Babylonians now playing the part of the Egyptians. But Ezekiel still finds some room for negativity, and we've seen in messages earlier in the book that belong to the second period of Ezekiel's prophesying that he could mingle hope and challenge assurance and warning in his vision of Israel's future.

And so, we're going to find in verses 32 through 44. But verse 32 really is spelling hope instead of despair. God would not leave his people in the pagan environment of exile among idle worshippers.

What is in your mind, verse 32, shall not happen the thought let us be like the nations like the tribes of the countries and worship wood and stone. But there also seems to be some sort of resignation here in the exile's attitude. We'd better worship like our foreign neighbors in whose land we're living in exile.

Or perhaps we, that's the way to go. When foreigners move to another land, they eventually get assimilated. And Germans, the children of Germans lose their German, the son of Mexicans lose their Spanish, and so on eventually.

And so, there's a sort of assimilation here. We'd better do that. That's the way to go, a natural way to go.

And so, there's a sort of despair but also resignation. This is what life is like. We'd better worship like our pagan neighbors.

No, God declares his sovereign right over his people. I will be king over you as I live, verse 33. Surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm with wrath poured out I will be king over you.

And we get language taken straight out of the Exodus stories. A mighty hand, an outstretched arm. And this mention of being a king, if you know Exodus then you will know of that song that was sung in Exodus 13, is it? Let me look at the right text.

Exodus 15, that's right. Exodus 15 in verse 18. The Lord will reign forever and ever.

That's how that song of Moses ends in Exodus 15. The Lord will reign forever and ever. And there's this sort of kingship here.

This part of that tradition was kingship, and here it's being reclaimed. I will be king over you in a new way.

And there's this to be this antitype of the old Exodus in a new Exodus. I will be king over you rather than those idols that you're talking about, those images of pagan gods that you're thinking of worshipping. So, God isn't going to let those other gods hold sway.

He's going to claim his people back. But the exiles must remember that the first generation had died out in the wilderness and never reached the promised land. And so there was going to be a similar wilderness scene in the new Exodus.

And we spoke of this just now. I will enter into judgment with you on this verse 36. As I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the wilderness, I will make you pass through the staff.

And it's going to be my decision that there is going to be this checkpoint, this security check, this screening process. And you've got to wait for that shepherd staff to be lifted up so that individual sheep can go forward. There will be this examination.

And I will find that some of you are rebels. And I will say no, no, no, no. You can't go on into the promised land.

You are going to die in the wilderness just as some of your forefathers died there in the wilderness. And so, it moves on to verse 39. As for you, O house of Israel thus says the Lord God, go serve your idols, every one of you now hereafter.

And that's sarcastic. That's just sarcastic. Go on, worship your idols.

But it implies to you it won't get you anywhere. The thing to do is get rid of that pagan worship. But there's that warning for the exiles to mend their ways, to give up their paganism if they want to go home.

At this point, we're back in the sphere of chapter 18, which has the message of preparing for the return by living out an appropriate lifestyle now. 18 and 20, they're very much on the same wavelength. But then there's that looking forward, about eventually going home.

And what's going to happen there? Well, there's going to be pure worship back in the promised land. Verse 40: on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, says the Lord God, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land. There, I will accept them.

There, I will require your contributions and the choices of your gifts for all your sacred things. As a pleasing odor, I will accept you. And this, of course, is a mini version of chapters 40 through 48.

And we're given just a little sketch here in verse 40 of what chapters 40 to 48 are going to spell out in a much greater detail. But the point is, in the homeland, eventually, only Israel's God will be worshipped, and God will accept the pure worship of his repatriated people, free of any pagan rights. That would mean that old problem, which had been mentioned in the course of chapter 20, is about God getting a bad reputation.

At a number of stages in chapter 20, the people deserve to be punished, and God held back for his own sake, for the sake of his name, for the sake of his reputation. Oh my, what will the nations think of me if I destroy the Israelites in the wilderness? They'll say, well, that wasn't much of a God, was it? That was a pretty weak God. And this is a bounce through chapter 20.

We had it in verse 9, I acted for the sake of my name. It came in verse 14, I acted for the sake of my name, so it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations. We had it in verse 22: I withheld my hand and acted for the sake of my name, so it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations.

And over and over again, there's this theological problem that God has, that he can't punish them because of the wrong impression it will give to other nations. And then the thought is here, I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations when you're back in the promised land and being blessed and acknowledge me properly in your worship, then I will be shown to be a powerful and holy God and the nations will have to recognize it. And this, of course, is another psalm that speaks in that way.

Psalm 126 and verse 2 is it? Psalm 126, the people went back from exile, then our mouth was filled with laughter, our tongues with shouts of joy, then it was said among the nations, the Lord had done great things for them. And Israel echoes what the nations say: the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoice. That would be the final answer, and God's name would be upheld and honored by the return from exile.

But restored Israel had, would have an obligation. They should never forget the depths to which they had sunk. And this comes in verse 43: you shall remember your ways and all your deeds by which you have polluted yourselves, and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed. And those, that memory, that bad memory, would be a permanent reminder of what they owed to God.

The same thing was said in chapter 16, verse 61, that such a memory would be a deterrent against going down that pagan path once more. Next time, we will finish chapter 20, moving from 20:45 to the end of chapter 23.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 10, Part 3, Exodus Old and New, Ezekiel 20:1-44.