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"Whose right it is": A Hermeneutical Study of Ezekiel 21:19–27

The perspective that is taken when looking at Ezekiel 21:19–27 makes a vast difference of opinion as to its meaning. In the Christian community the text is looked at from a historical and apocalyptic view. While in contemporary scholarly writings a purely historic viewpoint is preferred. Both agree on the general historical context, but the Christian community extends the meaning beyond the immediate historical context. A focus will be placed on the historic viewpoint, but will also include the evidence that is used by the Christian community to support their interpretations.

In order to understand these verses in Ezekiel, it is necessary to first explore the historical context. The chapter, which focuses on the imagery of a divine sword is set in the early period of the Babylonian exile of the southern or Judaic community.

In date the oracle belongs to the Year 589 B.C.E., in which Nebuchadnezzar, after the defection of Zedekiah (and Ammon), marched westwards.¹

By establishing this historical setting it is possible to explore the meaning of the text in a historic context. As demonstrated it was the time period of the Babylonian empire. The timeframe of 589 B.C.E. was one of uncertainty. As

1 Walter Zimmerli. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24. Ronald E. Clements, trans. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979. 441.

many prophets were known to do in Israelite history, Ezekiel was poised to analyze the situation.

The year 589 B.C.E. is a reasonable date and agreed upon by many of the commentaries on the chapter. Some contention, however, arises as to the place where Ezekiel revealed these words. The discussion centers around whether or not Ezekiel was in Jerusalem at the time or in exile. Evidence shows, however, that Ezekiel was indeed in exile at the time. According to Walter Zimmerli, "The prophecy was spoken in the geographical distance of exile, as also the breadth of Yahweh's address to the prophet itself supports."² He substantiates his argument by showing that the language connotes the idea of distance. "Mortal, set your face towards Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries; prophesy against the land of Israel" (Ezekiel 21.1).

The Babylonian army is approaching from the north, but is still too far away for one to know whether it will eventually head southwest towards Judah or southeast towards the land of the Ammonites with its capital, Rabbah.³

The Babylonian army was at a position of choice. In 2 Kings 25.6, Nebuchadnezzar was operating out of Riblah. From there he could either go to Rabbah or Jerusalem. It is these two directions or roads that YHWH commands Ezekiel to mark out in v. 19. The choice, however, according to Israelite tradition was up to YHWH not the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar.

War plans were not decided without the instruction of the deity. David took his decisions with aid of a prophetic oracle (1 Sam 22:) or that of the priestly ephod (1 Sam 23:9–12; 30:7f).

² Zimmerli, 441.

³ Aelred Cody. Ezekiel with an Excursive on Old Testament Priesthood. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984. 105.

In verse 22 the divine choice is made. Jerusalem is the city that YHWH chooses to overturn. In the following verse a clever device is used by the prophet using a statement from YHWH that the people will not believe the prophet's decision.

"But to them it will seem like a false divination;" (v. 23a). The people often refuse to take heed to the words of the prophet, but regardless Ezekiel assures them in v. 23b and 24 of their capture.

Verse 24 is the start of a poetic oracle against the inhabitants of Jerusalem and specifically the king. In 589 B.C.E. the King of Judea was Zedekiah. YHWH then asks the king to step down, by removing garments of stature.⁴ This change would bring instability and lack of a defined goal throughout Judea. From a historical point of view it is this turmoil that YHWH speaks of in verse 27.

A ruin, a ruin, a ruin -- I will make it! (Such has never occurred.) Until he comes whose right it is; to him I will give it.

This verse ties together many of the historic features and themes of the earlier verses. First, its destructive ruin that was prophesied in verse 22. By including this reference back to the earlier context of the writing it helps build the argument. Second, it leads to the same result and methods as the earlier verses. The destruction was sure and it would come through YHWH's divine choice.

The divine choice was made that YHWH would send Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem according to the historical view. It became the right of Nebuchadnezzar, because he operates as an aid to YHWH in carrying out the

⁴ Wayne A. Meeks, ed. Harper Collins Study Bible. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), cf. Ezekiel 21.24-26.

punishment of the people. The false hopes were ruined and so would the kingdom and capital. There would be little room for a messiah in such a gloomy interpretation.⁵

The issue of the divine right of passage of rulership responsibility over Jerusalem is more complicated than the historical view that was just presented. This complication comes with the Christian interpretations of verse 27. For the Christian interpreter, the ruler of Jerusalem would not come until after the return of the Messiah. The aim is to show a large contrast between the current ruinous state and the future peaceful kingship of the Christ.⁶

The argument and reference made by Christian authors even today is Genesis 49.10.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his.

From the Christian perspective, the tribute would come to Jesus, the peacemaker. Further substantiating the argument that Jesus is indeed after the Judaic lineage (Rev. 5:5). At the time when Jesus comes to fulfill the prophecy of Ezekiel it will begin the millennial age that is supposedly described the following to verses from Genesis 49.⁷

The evidence, however, is built upon a second interpretation. The historical view takes a completely separate meaning from Genesis 49.10. It shows that the tribute was a small military and religious center known as Shiloh,

5 Daniel I. Block. The Book of Ezekiel (Chapters 1–24). Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997. 692,693.

6 Block, 692 cf 192.

7 Charles Caldwell Ryrie. Ryrie Study Bible, Expanded Edition. Chicago, Illinois: The Moody Bible Institute, 1994. cf. Genesis 49.10.

which is the Hebrew word from which the interpretation tribute is formed. That was the stronghold of a bunch of hopefuls that wished Judah would gain control of Israel.⁸

The Christian interpretation works in the framework of their exposition of Old Testament scriptures. From a historical hermeneutical perspective, however, these verses found in Ezekiel take on a completely separate meaning. The historical viewpoint is the more reasonable approach especially since the switch in verse 27 to an apocalyptic meaning is not likely. Ezekiel was making political predictions and jurisdictions for the near future, not the age to come. These interpretations are found separate from the more immediate prophecies, which concerned Ezekiel in chapter 21. Although the device works to abstract messianic prophecy from a purely historical context and theme is useful and possibly understandable, it is not backed with ample contextual support. Therefore, Ezekiel 21.27's divine ruling would be done through Nebuchadnezzar who would become God's right hand in punishing the people, over the peaceful messianic tradition taught by Christians throughout the ages.

⁸ Meeks, cf. Genesis 49.10.