

Ezekiel chapter 38

Literature



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A person untrained in theology can stumble upon the Book of Ezekiel, read it, and conclude that it is not part of the Christian Bible. And that person will be forgiven his error because this book is in itself unique. In this book Yahweh does not only appear to be vengeful and angry, He is also asking Ezekiel to do something more than what He usually requires for a prophet. This study will take a closer look at the book of Ezekiel the Prophet sent to the people of Israel.

Particular attention will be given to the 38th chapter, specifically the words, concepts and ideas that pertains to violence and how violence is being used to discipline people. In this paper violence will be analyzed through the perspective of those living in the Ancient Near East and using Ezekiel as a portal to view a portion of Israel's history while they were exiled in Babylon. And afterwards, the proponent will use try to understand as to how these words are being perceived and analyzed in modern times.

Historical Background The book of Ezekiel the prophet is found in the Old Testament section of the Christian Bible. In the Jewish Bible it belongs to a division that they simply call as the " The Prophets". In the Christian Bible on the other hand Ezekiel is further categorized as belonging to the " Major Prophets" as opposed to the " Minor Prophets". The term major does not connote that Ezekiel's prophecy is more important than some of the prophetic books in the Old Testament.

It simply means that this book, just like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel are more lengthy than those of Hosea, Ezra, Nehemia, Joel, Amos, Nahum etc. According to a commentary in the Anchor Bible, " Ezekiel was and is perhaps the most misunderstood and challenging Hebrew prophet. His prophecies

and visions transport us to almost indescribable realms, completely uncharted territory this side of heaven. But as one of Israel's three major prophets, the words and symbolic actions of this mouthpiece of God were directed to a people weighed down by the realities of human experience" (Greenberg, 1997, p.).

A more information about Ezekiel and the book attributed to him can be found in James Newsome, *The Hebrew Prophets* and will be used in this study as the main source for background info. J. Newsome begins by saying that this Old Testament book was written from 592 B. C. to approximately 571 B. C. The location of the writing can be either at Jerusalem or Babylon and the author is leaning towards the latter(1984, p. 124). But it will be explained later why there are those who believe that Ezekiel may have traveled back and forth Israel and Babylon.

The main theological idea running throughout the book can be summarized into the following, that, " God has not forgotten the Jews exiled to Babylon, but will judge those Jews still living in Judah and will ultimately restore the people" (Newsome, 1984, p. 124). The chapter that is of particular interest is Chapter 38. Here, the prophet gave a series of oracles and anticipating a violent future for the nations involved e. g. Gog of Magog, Tubal, Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Beth Togarmah. There is something different though in this chapter that could not be found in other chapters of Ezekiel.

This is because the 38th is the pivotal chapter or the can be considered even as the climax for the whole book. As one can notice in the preceding chapters of Ezekiel the Lord was asking the prophet to issue stern words of warning. He is making his case known to the Israelites. Thus, in a lengthy <https://assignbuster.com/ezekiel-chapter-38/>

discourse - and through his mouthpiece - God explained clearly why he was offended and laid down the rationale for future action against his chosen people. It was made clear that idolatry was so serious that God used the metaphor of an adulterer to make the people understand the intense heartache of a betrayed lover.

Yet it seems that Yahweh's frustration is more than skin deep, that it is not simply a matter of a jilted lover that is causing these negative emotions. The description of God's pain was pushed to the next level when he described himself as having two promiscuous daughters who are lusting after multiple partners and if that is not enough these two daughters prostituted themselves and advertised their services even to far-away places like Assyria and Babylon. Now it is made clear as to how Yahweh viewed the rebellion of his children with regards to the worship of other gods.

Now, going back to the 38th chapter as the pivotal chapter one can see that in this section Yahweh revealed the mechanism which he will use to judge Israel. It was to taunt these bloodthirsty nations, looters and opportunists to attack an Israel that does not have proper fortifications and living without walls. Then the nations led by Gog and Tubal will be made to say, " I will invade a land of unwalled villages; I will attack a peaceful and unsuspecting people - all of them living without walls and without gates and bars.

I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from their nations, rich in livestock and good, living at the center of the land" (Ez 38: 11). But this chapter did not end there. There are still more surprises coming. If Gog and Tubal were both delirious right now with gladness that they are getting an unbelievable deal from Yahweh

himself then reading the end part of the section will serve as a rude awakening.

At the end Yahweh could not deny his love for Israel and instead of obliterating them in the face of a vast horde of armies, the Lord turned against the invading nations and he brought great slaughter against them. The ensuing calamity was so great upon the would be plunderers that it required additional space (chapter 39) to describe the extent of the casualties, “ Then those who live in the towns of Israel will go out and use the weapons for fuel and burn them up – the small and large shields, the bows and arrows, the war clubs and spears. For seven years they will use them for fuel.

They will not need to gather wood from the fields or cut it from the forests, because they will use the weapons for fuel. And they will plunder those who plundered them and loot those who looted them... (Ez 39: 9-10). This will also lead to the conclusion that Chapter 38 cannot stand on its own and requires Chapter 39 of the same book for a better grasp of the said section of Ezekiel. Now, what was presented above is the explanation of the purpose and meaning of the Ezekiel chapter 38 as it relates to the context within the book as a whole.

It was seen as the pivot or even as the climax that satisfies the crescendo from the opening chapter up to this point. But there are theologians who question this view. They are puzzled by the existence of Chapters 38 and 39 in the overall scheme of Ezekiel. They seriously question the appropriateness of the said chapters with regards to the context. The European theologian, Svere Boe cited T. J. Mills dissertation on Ezekiel that asserts the “ unorganic
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insertion” into the book of the 38th and 39th chapter and that these are later oracles (1997, p. 1).

Boe adds that these sections present an unexpected, seemingly unnecessary and frankly puzzling denouement and that there is no anticipation of them in the main consolation section of the Book of Ezekiel (1997, p. 82). Still there are those who agrees with the original interpretation that indeed Chapter 38 is the fitting transition from the early chapters describing the anger of Yahweh into the description of the plan on how all those negative emotions can be pacified by punishing someone and yet offer a way of escape for Israel.

The answer to this complicated dilemma is found in chapter 38, in the use of marauding nations as the rod of discipline and at the same time the means for blessing the new Israel. The same view has led others to concluded that the said chapters, “... links quite naturally wht the preceding chapters 36-37 of which it was intended to be the dramatic climax” and there are even those who see a developing pattern that was used in ancient compositions of myths and other stories: 1. challenge to the deity; 2. a battle; 3. a victory; 4. a procession; 5. the enthronement/building of a house; and 6. a feast (Boe, 1997, p. 82).

Violence Greenberg was correct in saying that at the end, the words of Ezekiel are primarily to encourage and to administer tough love to a group of outcasts and exiles to a foreign land. But in order to get to the point a newbie in the world of Old Testament Prophecy and ancient Near East anthropology will be more than shock to discover the terms and ideas being used in this book. J. W. Tarlin remarked that the book of Ezekiel radiates <https://assignbuster.com/ezekiel-chapter-38/>

violence – violence in multiple forms. And the author expounds on this view by saying:

First, there is the violence in the form of war, massacre, and exile that Yahweh has brought on Israel, is bringing on Judah, and will bring against the surrounding nations. Then there is the graphically depicted violence against women that pervades both the parable of Yahweh's people as the unfaithful adopted daughter/bride ... and the allegory of Jerusalem and Samaria as promiscuous sisters ... (and) finally there is the violence to which Yahweh subjects the prophet himself: exile, seizure-like vision, aphonia, and paralysis (see Beal and Gunn, 1997, p. 75).

The contemporary historian and student of the Ancient Near East will find it impossible to understand the reason for their use of violence to communicate divine truths. For instance, “ In Egypt one can find temples decorated with piles of hands, heads ... or images of victim's bodies severed beneath chariot wheels. In Mesopotamia, one encounter similar cases of maiming ... people being flayed alive, having their lower lip cut-off or being impaled on stakes... ” (Wellman, 2007, p. 13).

According to Wellman this has led nineteenth-century historians to label Egyptians and Mesopotamians as primitive warmongering people groups. Everyone knows that this is not an accurate depiction of these civilizations. In the same way, the words of Ezekiel should not be interpreted as simply free expression of violent thoughts. Wellman further explains that there is something about Ancient Near East culture that made them see violence in a different way; that it was used more as a symbol for divine order. The acts of

violence therefore seen on ancient temple walls are symbolic of a process of restoring order to chaos.

It can be argued at this point that the excessive use of violence in Ezekiel's book is in keeping with the cultural norms of the region. One can even go further by saying that violence as in violence in the ritualistic type - as described by Wellman - is the only language that could be understood by the people in the Ancient Near East when it comes to their gods. Therefore it is not enough to simply say that Yahweh is displeased. The usual threat of famine and sickness and diseases is not enough for the people in this area.

They need to understand God's wrath using the illustrations of war. Thus was the main theme in the book, that Yahweh will bring armies against his people and at end these armies will be destroyed also because the chief aim of Yahweh is not the exaltation of one tribe against another but it is to make his Name known in all the earth. Symbolism or not the concept of the use of violence is disturbing for 21st century readers and they need an explanation as to why Ezekiel - unique as it is - has to resort to such type of language.

If there is no appropriate and adequate explanation to the morbid and oftentimes violent ideas found in this book then one can be assured that some radical group or perhaps a misguided cult leader will quote portions in this book to justify their call for bloodshed and other criminally reprehensible acts. In fact in the latter part of this study the above-mentioned scenario became a reality in the United States of America when some groups used Ezekiel as the basis for their radical actions. Contemporary Take on the 38th Others may dismiss the Bible on the grounds of controversial texts such as Ezekiel chapter 38.

Well, it cannot be helped that the language used in ancient times - especially for a book written in the violent world of the Ancient Near East - has offended the sensibilities of modern readers. But it is erroneous to say that the writer of Ezekiel is simply enjoying the depiction of violence. The whole reading of the book will make it clear that Yahweh is not enjoying the pronouncements of doom and yet he needs to do it to shock Israel into repentance. But there is another contemporary perspective to Ezekiel and this is popularized by zealous American Christians who seemed to welcome the apocalyptic events described in Ezekiel.

In the Chapter 38 the nation called Meshek can also be translated as Rosh. Modern day zealots are saying that Rosh is Russia and that the people of God must be prepared in the upcoming battle with the Russian empire. In short Ezekiel contributed to the upsurge of "end-of-the-world" theories and cults. Conclusion Studying Ezekiel will not be a walk in the park. The use of violence is especially difficult to overcome for the first time student of Biblical Prophecy. This means that Ezekiel is unique in the way that it describes God and his depiction of his relationship with his people.

It is wrong to interpret this passage simply as a product of a perverse mind. Theologians had successfully argued that this style of writing is a byproduct of Ancient Near East culture that see violence as something more than the shedding of blood. For these people violence can be ritualistic and can be used to communicate divinity. In the case of Ezekiel, it can be argued that he was forced to use the language of violence as it is the only language that can be understood by a people and a region who see war as more than a clashing of swords but a ritual to institute divine order.