

Bible-Reading Coach Podcast Transcript

Week 37: Ezekiel 31-47, *A Zombie Army? And a Vision of Restoration*

Welcome to Week 37 of the Bible Reading Coach Podcast. My name is Karl Vaters and I'm here to help you read through the Bible in 52 weeks.

This week, we are continuing and we will finish reading through the epic book of Ezekiel, the prophet. Now, two weeks ago, we talked about how Ezekiel is a book written in what's called the apocalyptic style of writing. So let's talk about that a little bit before we finish the book up. The apocalyptic style of writing came into being about 200 BC, and by 150 AD is about when people stopped writing. So for about 350 years, a little bit in BC and a little bit in AD, this was a fairly popular style of writing. It's a style that uses images and visions and figures of speech. A couple of the other apocalyptic books in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation, Joel and Zechariah, are also written in the apocalyptic style. And as mentioned earlier, we saw a couple chapters of apocalyptic writing in Isaiah as well.

So what is apocalyptic writing? And why do people write that way? Well, first of all, apocalyptic writing was written by oppressed people, as a way of communicating to each other, about the eventual overthrow of those who were oppressing them. The problem is, if you're an oppressed people, if you're enslaved, if you're under the thumb of a more powerful group of people, and you want to communicate to each other about overthrowing your oppressors, if the oppressors get a hold of your message, that's treason, and you're dead.

So how do you communicate the hopefulness that we will eventually overcome our oppressors without worrying about the oppressors getting a hold of it? Well, what you do is you write in code. So for instance, in World War Two, there's talk about the Enigma machine that when we crack the Enigma code, we were able to figure out the German code, for instance.

So what was the code that was in it? What happened was this, they would use images and figures of speech and ideas that were only familiar to their own people. And the people that were oppressing them had no familiarity with it whatsoever. Here's an example of the apocalyptic code in action that we read already back in Ezekiel, chapter 1, verses 27 and 28. "I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down, he looked like fire and brilliant light surrounded him, like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day. So was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord."

If you've read Revelation before that sounds familiar, because yeah, it's very similar to the description of Jesus that will come up in week 52. In the book of Revelation. This week, we'll see another big apocalyptic image with the valley of the dry bones in chapter 37. So if this is all code, how is that code? I mean, it's weird, but how is it code? Here's how the imagery of a person like we just read is imagery that was familiar. And that meant certain things to the Hebrews, that would have meant nothing to the Babylonians at all. When we get to Revelation, what we will see is that the entire code of Revelation is built on the Hebrew Scriptures. Because later on, by the time we get to the New Testament, their oppressors are no longer the Babylonians, their oppressors by then or the Romans.

But the Romans didn't have a familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures, any more than the Babylonians would have now, but at this time of the Babylonians, there isn't much scripture, even for the Hebrews to rely on. So they're talking about things that were at this point probably

passed along in oral tradition, some of which is lost to us today. In fact, that's one of the challenges that we have in reading the apocalyptic parts of Scripture today is, we only know a little bit more about the Hebrew figures of speech than the Babylonians and the Romans did.

Although again, by the time we get to Revelation, we'll talk about it then a great detail in Revelation to code is very obviously, quotes of Hebrew Scripture and images from Hebrew scripture, so that they could talk to each other and not be exposed to their oppressors. So that's what's happening here. They're speaking to each other in a literary code. We're using these images that even today, some of them we don't understand, but we can draw from inference what they were talking about.

So let's get to the passage. This week, we'll be reading starting in chapters 31 and 32. In chapters 31 and 32. It's the last two chapters of the section that we started last week, which was the condemnation of Israel's enemies. The two chapters we'll read to begin this week are the last of a long lament against Egypt. And Egypt, of course, is and still remains the oldest enemy of Israel. Then we'll get to chapter 33, which begins the The next and final section of the book of Ezekiel called the Book of consolation.

All right. So in the Book of Consolation, starting with chapter 33, you have a series of oracle's or prophecies, or what we today would call sermons. The first half of Ezekiel chapter 33. Is God reminding Ezekiel that 'Ezekiel, You are my watchman over the people. And because you're the watchman, you are obligated to warn the people when calamity comes'. And then in the second half of chapter 33, word arrives to Ezekiel that Jerusalem has, in fact, fallen, just as he prophesied, as we read about last week with the start of the siege.

So God tells him, you're about to get some really bad news. It's your obligation to tell them even if you could get in trouble over it, and then immediately he hears Jerusalem has fallen. And again, this is timestamped. So we know exactly when this occurred. All right, we then go from there to chapters of verse, chapters 34 through 36, by the time we get to chapter 36, is a prophecy against the mountains of Israel. It's weird. There's this prophecy against the mountains of Israel, like why are you talking to mountains? Well, let's see if we can parse what some of this might be.

Why is Switzerland, for instance, considered a safe and neutral country? A big part of the reason is because the Alps almost completely surround it. Like if you want to attack Switzerland, before airplanes came along, it was virtually impossible. The Alps are huge and almost impassable. Certainly they're impassable by armies.

Now, what happened with Israel was, the mountains around Israel didn't protect them. First of all, they're barely Hills compared to the Alps. But nevertheless, mountains are always a stand in for their safety. The mountains are where we go to for refuge, and they are the place that protects us from the enemy. So what he's saying here is, mountains, your mountains, your safety failed you. And now they're laughing at your mountains, your safety, because you didn't protect them like you're supposed to. But by the end of this prophecy to the mountains, it says, but I will restore you and your reputation again. And you will have a strong reputation one more time. Because eventually basically got what God is saying is, I'm going to be your mountain from this point on, I will be your protection.

And then from there, from Chapter 36, we get to what is by far the most well known image out of the book of Ezekiel, called the Valley of the Dry Bones. Chapter 37. We have this amazing, interesting, fascinating story. God takes his eagle to a valley, and this valley is filled

with dead men's Dry Bones. When he gets there, God asks Ezekiel the question, "Can these bones live?" Now the obvious answer, if you're gonna feel the old dry bones, the obvious answer is no, they can't. They're way beyond the point. We're not talking a dead body, here. We're talking dry bones. The obvious answer is no. But Ezekiel is wise enough, when God is speaking to him to know that anything is possible. So as equals faith requires him to answer this way. "Oh, Sovereign Lord, you alone know." Good answer.

When God asks you, basically is something impossible? The answer isn't Oh, yeah, that's impossible. The answer is "You alone know, God. What are you planning to do?" So God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones. And when he does, they come together, and then flesh and sinew starts getting upon them, and then they start walking around, but the Bible says they had no breath.

So there's an army of bones that comes together and becomes living humans walking around, but with no breath in their body. Does that sound familiar? Yeah. Like, okay, Karl, are you telling me that the Bible has a zombie army? That's sure what it sounds like, right? It's amazing. So is there an actual zombie army in the Bible? Well, here's the thing. Where was this valley? Was he taken to an actual Valley? Did he see actual bones come together? And an actual army formed? Well, was it a vision, or did it actually happen in real time and space? I believe it's a vision. And here's why.

It starts with this 37:1, the hand of the Lord was upon me. And he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley. This is very similar language to the language that the apostle John uses in Revelation, which we'll get to in week 52. Hundreds of years later John says this in Revelation 1:10, "On the Lord's day, I was in the spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." And then he goes into all of the images and visions of the book of Revelation. So I believe it's a vision that God gives him. It's not an actual physical Valley.

It's a vision and it's not imaginary. It's real in the spiritual world, but it doesn't happen in the physical world. And then this chapter chapter 37, ends with another far less shocking visual sermon, where Ezekiel is told to put the name of Israel on one stick to put the name of Judah on another stick. And then he's told these two sticks, Israel and Judah will come back together again, and the divided nation will be one.

We then get to Ezekiel 38, and 39. And for the first of only two times in the entire Bible, you're going to hear about a pair of words called Gog, and Magog. The other place we see it will be in week 52, again, Revelation Chapter 20, talks about Gog and Magog as well. And one of the big questions for people who love prophecy and apocalyptic literature in the Bible is who or what are Gog and Magog? Well, we know that Magog was the name of a grandson of Noah, we read about that back in Genesis chapter 10 Verse 2, but this doesn't appear to have anything to do with Magog, the grandson of Noah or any of his descendants. Gog and Magog appears to be a catch-all phrase for the enemies of Israel.

So it's like what we might call barbarians today. Right at one point, the barbarians were a specific people. Today we use the term barbarian for anybody who is uncivilized and, and crazy or right we call them barbarians. All right, it's become a catch-all phrase. And it seems as though Gog and Magog are a catch all phrase for whoever comes against Israel from this point on. So essentially what these chapters of Gog and Magog tell us is that anyone who comes against you, Israel, from this point on, will lose because I'm on your side.

Then in chapters 40 through 44, God gives Ezekiel a vision. And it's a really vivid and very specific vision of the temple, which at this point has been destroyed. And the vision is of a temple that's restored to an even greater glory than before. This vision is time stamped, again, as so much of his email is in chapter 40, verse 1, it's timestamp to a day that we now know is April 28 573 BC. Yes, we know with that kind of precision, that's the day he received the vision about a temple that it would eventually be restored.

Now, for us today, chapters 40 through 44 can be a bit of a challenging read. Because he's given a rod to measure the temple, its sides, its doors, its height, it's all kinds of different things and as measurement after measurement after measurement, and it's kind of like, oh, this is boring. But while it may be boring to read, in a general sense, like us, it's fascinating for anybody who wants to do the study, because you could literally build that temple to those exact measurements today. And in fact, models of it have been built. So we know exactly the size that it was.

Now this temple of these measurements was never built. But the specificity of him measuring it, what that saying in apocalyptic terms is, someday an actual physical temple will be built, which of course, it would be by the time of Jesus, which we'll get to, in really just a few short weeks. Now, when we get to the New Testament. Then in chapters 45, through 46, God gives Ezekiel instructions for how the land will be divided, when eventually they do get back to it again and 70 years, you also gives them instructions, when you when the people do get back to the land and seven years, give these kinds of offerings, and have these holy days celebrations.

He's very specific, like not only am I going to bring you back, but here are the plans for what you do when you get back. It's very, very organized this idea of Holy Days, and of the kinds of offerings to give. We mentioned it earlier, there are some people who just don't like the idea of organized religion, but the religion and the religious practices in the Bible, Old and New Testament both are very, very organized, organized religion is biblical, unorganized, disorganized and unstructured our religion tends not to do very much good for anybody. But structural biblical religion is a help to all of us. It gives us precision, it helps us to know when we're going to meet.

Somebody just recently said to me, doing Sabbath all by yourself is almost impossible. And he was talking actually about way back in the day for those of us who are my age and older, 67 years or so, we remember back when like all the stores were closed on Sunday, and that's not necessary to do, but when we did do it, what it meant was everybody rested on that day. It's kind of like when you have a holiday like Thanksgiving or Christmas or you have Easter right and everybody is celebrating at the same time. You truly take those days off, whereas your birthday may be a holiday, but it's just your birthday. So it's not nearly the day of rest, that the holidays are when everybody's doing it together. So this idea of structure of religion gives us something that we can build around together so that we can celebrate and learn and worship and do ministry together because of the organizational structure of our faith.

And then the book will conclude with chapters 47 and 48. There's a final vision, where Ezekiel is brought back to the temple. And this time when he's brought back to the temple, there's a river coming out from it flowing from the temple. And in the Bible, rivers are symbols of life and healing. So what he's being told by God through this vision is that life and healing will flow once again from God's house, even though it has just recently been torn down.

And where will this river go? Well, he goes out, and he measures the depth of the river and the width of the river, and it becomes massively deep and massively wide, and it flows to far reaches. In other words, it's going, the healing river that will come from my temple will be deep, it will be wide, and it will go everywhere, life and hope will come back everywhere again. And this is the final image of Ezekiel, as God then gives each Ezekiel his final instructions for dividing the lands, among the tribes, and for the gates of the city.

So for a book that started with prophecies about the destruction of the city, and then saw the destruction of the city fulfilled, the last words of this book are really hopeful, and they're about its resurrection. In fact, the very last words that you and I will read this week at the very end of Ezekiel are this. And the name of the city from that time on will be the Lord is there. "The Lord is there" in Hebrew, are the words Yahweh Shammah or Yerushalem, or Jerusalem? Yes. That's the restoration he's talking about. It's a great book. It's a fantastic book. There's a lot in it this week. I hope you get a lot out of it. And I hope to see you next week.

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