

Ezekiel 22:23-31

“Prophetic Rebuke for Violating Clean and Unclean”

“And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, say to her, “You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in the day of indignation.” There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her. Her priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they hide their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned among them. Her princes within her are like wolves tearing the prey, by shedding blood *and* destroying lives in order to get dishonest gain. Her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, “Thus says the Lord GOD,” when the LORD has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced oppression and committed robbery, and they have wronged the poor and needy and have oppressed the sojourner without justice. I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. Thus I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; their way I have brought upon their heads,’ declares the Lord GOD.”

The preceding passage of Ezekiel 22:1-22, details the various sins of Jerusalem, which are placed squarely at the feet of *nasi'ei Yisrael* (נְסִיֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל), “the rulers of Israel” (22:6, NASU) or “the princes of Israel” (RSV). The sins variably include bloodshed (22:3-4, 9, 12, 13), idolatry (22:4), oppression of parents and sojourners (22:7), despising God’s holiness and His Sabbath (22:8-9), inappropriate sexual activities (22:10-11), bribery and unethical economic practices (22:12). The consequence of these actions will be exile from the Promised Land (22:15), and a severe judgment likened unto a purifying of various metals (22:17-22). That Jerusalem will become a mockery (22:5), that the people will be exiled and dispersed (22:13-16), and that there will be extreme calamity, is guaranteed. The judgment to be issued is sometimes compared to the previously-delivered oracle of Isaiah 1:2-31.

While the leaders of Jerusalem are chastised for the sins they have committed and shame they have incurred, it is not as though the people at large are also not responsible, as will be detailed in Ezekiel 22:23-31 following. In the prophetic word that follows, the prophets (22:25), priests (22:26, 28), princes or officials (22:27), and the people of the land (22:28), are all targeted as those who have sinned against the Lord. There is somewhat of a repetition of the sins previously described, but it is obvious that the corruption and disdain for God is more encompassing. Leslie C. Allen sets the stage:

“While the royals had concentrated on such wrongdoing in Jerusalem, their officials who represented them in the provincial towns of Judah had illtreated people at large and especially the underprivileged. The priests, properly custodians of Israel’s sacred traditions and both practitioners and teachers of the vital norms of purity and holiness, belied their calling. They contravened the ideology of separation that lay at the heart of Israel’s cult in terms of calendar, food and many other aspects of religious life. Yahweh

himself had been affected by these lapses, which allowed the impure and the unholy to infiltrate both a holy temple and a holy people."¹

Chastising leaders is not something that is at all irregular to the Prophets of the Tanach. Zephaniah 3:3-4, issued during the reign of King Josiah (640-608 B.C.E.), is often thought to serve as some sort of background material for what is witnessed here in Ezekiel:

"Her princes within her are roaring lions, her judges are wolves at evening; they leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men; her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law."

In the estimation of Daniel I. Block, "In his utilization of the Zephaniah oracle Ezekiel is both a traditionalist and a creative rhetorician. He skillfully interweaves borrowed and characteristically Ezekielian ideas to create a single coherent whole which, by the testimony of the introduction and the conclusion, constitutes the revealed will of God."²

Among the sins which the people are indicted for committing, was a failure for the people to be taught the difference between clean and unclean, and a failure to observe the Sabbath or *Shabbat* (22:26). Marvin A. Sweeney thinks, "The emphasis is on the ritual impurity created through these actions; as in the Holiness Collection, Ezekiel believes that both cultic infractions and ethical violations create impurity."³ While various Torah instructions violated by the people are those which involved fidelity to the Lord and the establishment of a stable society—not properly observing the dietary laws or Sabbath would, as is noted by interpreters, cause them to lose a major piece of their distinct identity. John B. Taylor indicates, "Their failure to maintain the distinctive quality of the things of God meant that God too was disregarded and treated with contempt."⁴ John Goldingay further recognizes, "In theory, being separated from the nations should have made them distinctive, but the theory has not worked; perhaps being scattered among the nations will work better."⁵

22:23-24 The judgment that is to befall Jerusalem and its people is described in terms of a rain cleansing the land: "The word of HASHEM came to me, saying, 'Son of Man, say to her: You are a land that has not been cleansed, that has not been rained upon on the day of fury'" (ATS). Various commentators have noted a likely thematic connection intended between *gush'mah b'yom za'am* (גֹּשֶׁם מַה בַּיּוֹם זָעַם), "washed with rain on the day of indignation" (v. 24, NJPS), and the Flood of Noah which purged the Earth of sinners. Block describes,

"Ezekiel's linkage of the motifs of rain and judgment is based on the Genesis flood story, which refers to the downpour that inundated the earth as *gešem* [גֶּשֶׁם]. The purpose of this flood was to cleanse the entire globe of human wickedness (*rā'â* [רָעָה]), corruption (*šĥt* [שְׁחָת]), and violence (*ḥāmās* [חַמָּס], Gen. 6:5, 11). Yahweh hereby declares that this same kind of cleansing is long overdue for the land of Israel."⁶

Iain M. Duguid further comments,

¹ Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel 20-48*, Vol 29 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 39.

² Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 724.

³ Sweeney, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1083.

⁴ Taylor, 169.

⁵ John Goldingay, "Ezekiel," in *ECB*, 643.

⁶ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 723.

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"The concept of rain on the land as an element of judgment is present in the Flood narrative (Gen. 7:4, 11), and the expectation of a future destructive flood is reflected in Ezekiel 13:11 and 38:22. It may therefore be better to understand 22:24 as the absence of a cleansing deluge, like the great Flood, which would have purged the land of evildoers in one great day of destruction. Because of this lack of cleansing in the past, the land remains full of oppression, detailed in the following verses, which will lead to a final pouring out of indignation on the people (22:31)."⁷

22:25 The first group admonished are *nevi'ha* (נְבִיאֵיהָ) or "her prophets" (the LXX has "princes"). It is stated, "There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst, like a roaring lion that tears [its] prey; they have devoured souls, they have taken away [Jerusalem's] treasure and worth, they have increased her widows in her midst" (ATS). The description of a lion tearing into its prey has been employed previously (19:3, 6). Much of the ravaging activity, committed by Jerusalem's prophets, has to be connected not only to their corruption, but also the false message they declare (v. 28).

22:26 Three sets of indictments are described in v. 26 against *kohane'ha* (כֹּהֲנֵיהָ), "her priests": (1) abusive action has been committed toward God's Torah, (2) there has been a failure to instruct the people in holiness and cleanliness, and (3) there has been a failure to enforce Sabbath regulations.

The **first** crime is described as *cham'su torati* (חָמַסְתָּ תּוֹרָתִי). The verb *chamas* (חָמַס), in the Qal stem, can mean "to **treat violently**" (*HALOT*),⁸ reflected in the common renderings of *cham'su torati* as "have done violence to My law" (NASU) or "have done violence to my teaching" (NRSV). It cannot go unnoticed, however, that various Jewish versions have rendered *cham'su torati* as "robbed My Torah" (ATS) or "robbed the people of My Torah" (Keter Crown Bible). As S. Fisch describes it, "The priests were rebuked for robbing the Torah from the people. Since they did not observe it themselves, how could they warn the people to observe it?"⁹ This is, to be sure, an interesting approach to *cham'su torati*, yet, "have violated my Tora" (Jerusalem Bible-Koren) or "have violated My Teaching" (NJPS) is the more common perspective. Noting the rarity of the verb *chamas*, Block summarizes,

"This is one of only six occurrences of the verb *hāmas*, 'to treat wrongly, to do violence to,' in the entire OT [Zeph. 3:4; Job 15:33; 21:27; Prov. 8:36; Jer. 23:3; Lam. 2:6], and one of only two occurrences of the phrase *hāmas tôrâ*. The unusual association of such a strong verb with the Torah highlights the priests' blatant disregard for the substance and intent of the Mosaic law. Although the present context places the emphasis entirely on ceremonial aspects of the Torah, presumably their crimes extended to violations of ethical regulations as well (cf. Mal. 2:5-9)."¹⁰

Malachi 2:7 would notably, much later, admonish, "A *cohen's* lips should safeguard knowledge, and people should seek *Torah* from his mouth, because he is the messenger of *ADONAI-Tzva'ot*" (CJB).

⁷ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, pp 288-289.

⁸ *HALOT*, 1:329.

⁹ Fisch, 148.

¹⁰ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 725.

The **second** crime involves a failure on the part of the priests to direct in separating out holy and unholy, and clean and unclean things: *v'yechall'lu qadashai bein-qodesh l'chol lo hivdil'u u'bein-ha'tamei l'tahor lo hodi'u* (בְּיַחַד לְחַלּוֹת לֹא הִבְדִּילוּ וּבֵינֵי-הַקְּדוֹשִׁים לְשֹׁהַר לֹא הוֹדִיעוּ), "and-they-profane holy-things-of-me between holy to-common not they-distinguish and-between the-unclean to-clean not they-teach" (Kohlenberger).¹¹ This has notably been poorly paraphrased by The Message, with, "They can't tell the difference between sacred and secular. They tell people there's no difference between right and wrong," as it is obvious that *u'bein-ha'tamei l'tahor*, "the difference between contaminated and purified" (ATS), has been made into something other than the Torah's dietary laws (Leviticus 11:47; 20:25), and/or other directions regarding cleanliness and purity. While involving murder and extreme ethical violations, 22:9 previously did notably condemn Jerusalem's princes with, "Slanderous men have been in you for the purpose of shedding blood, and in you they have eaten at the mountain *shrines*. In your midst they have committed acts of lewdness."

Much of the violation in v. 26b may be observed as focused around Leviticus 10:10: "to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean." Block acknowledges, "this charge derives ultimately from Lev. 10:10, which occurs immediately after the account of Nadab and Abihu's use of alien fire before Yahweh."¹² Given the likelihood that Nadab and Abihu were intoxicated when going before the Lord (Leviticus 10:9), concepts of holy/profane and clean/unclean should be taken as involving more than just the Torah's dietary laws. Fisch takes what has been violated by Jerusalem's priests, as the "Law concerning animals fit or unfit for consumption, and the ritual purity of the individual and the family."¹³

The **third** crime committed by the priests is, "they hid their eyes from My Sabbaths" (ATS) or "hidden their eyes from my *shabbats*" (CJB). This is not the first time in Ezekiel that Sabbath violations have been mentioned (20:16, 21, 24). Noting all of the crimes issued against Jerusalem's priests, Ralph P. Alexander describes,

"The priests, who should have been leading the people into the knowledge of God in the Mosaic covenant, had done violence to that covenant by polluting God's holy statutes (v.26). They had failed to observe to teach the distinction between the holy and profane, the clean and the unclean. They disregarded the observance of the Sabbath and profaned God through their pagan ritual practices. They gave poor instruction in the things of the Lord. What instruction they did give was only for monetary gain (cf. Mic 3:11)."¹⁴

More specifically, "they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths" (NIV), while involving failure to properly direct the people in general to keep both the seventh-day *Shabbat* and various High Sabbaths, to Duguid, "seems to indicate the priests' failure to prosecute those who transgressed the law."¹⁵

Even with some source-critical perspectives of the Pentateuch detectable, Steven Tuell's thoughts on what v. 26 communicate, and the failure of the priests, are certainly worth noting:

¹¹ Kohlenberger, 4:358.

¹² Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 726.

¹³ Fisch, 148.

¹⁴ Alexander, in *EXP*, 6:849.

¹⁵ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 289.

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"The holy, the common, the clean, and the unclean mark the borders of the priestly worldview. The holy is that which belongs or pertains to God, while the common is the realm of ordinary life, or what we might call the secular. While the Holiness code calls all Israel to holiness (see, e.g., Lev. 19:2), in its most particular sense the holy is that area which is God's alone. God commands that Israel take strict care that the holy and common do not mix (in Ezek. 42:20, the wall around the temple complex is meant 'to separate the holy from the common'). The story of Uzzah, who touched the ark and was struck dead (2 Sam. 6:7//1 Chr. 13:10), provides a grim reminder of the dangerous power of the holy. The clean and unclean relate to the realms of the permissible and impermissible: what Israel can or cannot eat, drink, plant, use, or water. Contact with unclean things (e.g., blood, corpses, or bodily discharges) communicates defilement, which the contaminated must purge by ritual and sacrifice. A critical responsibility of the priesthood was to know and observe these distinctions, and to teach them to the people [Lev. 10:10-11]...But Ezekiel claims that Jerusalem's priests have perverted this teaching role, bringing defilement upon themselves and the people...In Ezekiel 20, failure to observe the Sabbath was a major reason for expulsion from the land (v. 12-15, 20-23). The priests, then, are particularly responsible for the faithlessness that led Jerusalem to destruction."¹⁶

22:27-28 V. 27 issues a serious indictment against *sare'ha* (שָׂרֵיהָ), "her princes" or "her officials" (NIV): "Her officials are like wolves rending prey in her midst; they shed blood and destroy lives to win ill-gotten gain" (NJPS). V. 28 issues another word against *nevi'eha* (נְבִיאֶיהָ), "her prophets," asserting, "And her prophets smeared plaster for them, for they see worthless [visions] and they divine falsehood for them. They say, 'Thus said the Lord HASHEM/ELOHIM,' when HASHEM did not speak" (v. 28, ATS). The noun *tafeil* (תַּפֵּיל) can mean both "mud-plaster, whitewash" (*CHALOT*),¹⁷ but is mainly employed to speak about how the false prophets in Jerusalem are covering up the truth from the people at large. References to false prophets are not unique to Ezekiel's declarations (13:1-13), nor to the Prophets (i.e., Jeremiah 29:2-9).

22:29 The final group of people who are targeted in this oracle, as being in error, are the *am ha'eretz* (עַם הָאֶרֶץ), or "the people of the land." It is noted, "The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without justice" (ESV). It would seem unlikely that this is only the result of not being adequately instructed in God's Torah (v. 26a), as basic justice and sustenance for the oppressed should be something that comes naturally to His people. It was to be imbued in the psyche of Ancient Israel, after all, as "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:34). Treating sojourners and/or the oppressed in general, with a sense of regard, was to be based in Israel's national story of the deliverance via the Exodus.

22:30-31 Upon witnessing the sin, rebellion, disregard for His Torah, and the injustice that was being perpetuated, the Lord exclaims in dismay, "And I sought a man among them to repair the wall or to stand in the breach before Me in behalf of this land,

¹⁶ Tuell, 147.

¹⁷ *CHALOT*, 394.

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that I might not destroy it; but I found none" (v. 30, NJPS). In this case, standing in the breach is akin to interceding and acknowledging the errors being committed, pleading for God's mercy. It is witnessed of Moses in Psalm 106:23: "Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen one stood in the breach before Him, to turn away His wrath from destroying *them*." Unfortunately, as was also observed in Jeremiah 5:1-6, no one would be found, "who does justice, who seeks truth." The conclusion too, of v. 31, is, "So I poured out My wrath over them, and consumed them with the flame of My fury; I have placed [the consequences of] their [evil] way upon their head—the word of the Lord HASHEM/ELOHIM" (ATS).

Ezekiel 22:23-31 application While there are various sins described in Ezekiel ch. 22, including sins of murder and sexual indiscretion, **Sabbath disobedience** (22:8, 26) and **disregard of the Torah's dietary laws** (22:9, 26), are also included as reasons for God requiring the exile of the Jerusalemites (22:15-16). While modern Bible readers might focus their attention more on the gruesome crimes of murder, injustice to the oppressed, and sexual sins occurring—a violation of *Shabbat* and of *kashrut* were considered serious enough to be listed right alongside these other crimes. As would be communicated later in Ezekiel 33:25-26,

"Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "You eat *meat* with the blood *in it*, lift up your eyes to your idols as you shed blood. Should you then possess the land? You rely on your sword, you commit abominations and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Should you then possess the land?"'"

Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, a somewhat liberal Christian commentator, does still rightly recognize how modern Christians tend to overlook the perspective of a Biblical figure like Ezekiel, who had little problem issuing declarations against people who violated God's statutes for a just society, while at the same time also violating God's statutes for holiness and purity. Much of this, as she observes, is based in a problematic idea of pitting God's Law against God's grace:

"Ezekiel does not hesitate to juxtapose cultic acts with social atrocities, public life with private relationships. Life is a seamless whole, everywhere testifying to one's most fundamental commitments....Israel's torah, too often dismissed by Christians as the antithesis of 'gospel,' in fact testifies to existence lived out in utter awareness that life is sacred—not only one's own life, but equally the lives of others. Faithful partnership with God is not a consequence of private piety alone. Abundant life is quite different from life surrounded by abundance. Ezekiel challenges Judah's leaders, the exiles, and his readers to embody Yahweh's holiness, justice, and love."¹⁸

Duguid, representing more of a conservative, Reformed Christian perspective (Presbyterian), actually uses the Prophet Ezekiel's oracle here, to direct modern Christian readers more in the most excellent direction of recognizing the need of how God's Law necessarily requires the presence of His grace in the Messiah. Together, both His Instruction and the work of His Son, are to be providential for the work of His salvation in the lives of people:

¹⁸ Darr, in *NIB*, 6:1316.

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“Ezekiel’s methodology for addressing the people of his own day was to show them how far short they had fallen of the standards laid down in God’s Word. He indicted his hearers comprehensively of the crimes against the Law and the Prophets. The standards he used were not those of contemporary society, with which they might compare favorably, but God’s perfect law, before which all stood condemned. He showed them the extent to which sin had contaminated the very heart of their society. He charged them not merely with sin in general, but of detailed specific sins of comprehensive range. Only after they had been confronted with the reality and depth of their sin could they come to an understanding of the rightness of God’s wrath against them. Only then could the good news of God’s grace be preached to them.

“On the basis of the approach of Ezekiel and some of the other prophets, it has sometimes been insisted that the law is a necessary first step toward understanding the gospel, as if only after the first understanding fully the claims of the law can one come to Christ. In fact, however, law and grace belong together in contributing to our understanding of sin and thus our understanding of our need for Christ. If we merely understand the law without seeing God’s grace, we can fall into the trap of seeing God as the cosmic policeman, upholding apparently arbitrary standards that get in the way of our self-fulfillment...

“...Law and grace understood together point us to our need for Christ. In Christ, we see that God’s law is good and perfect, designed for our utmost fulfillment as human beings; the only utterly fulfilled person who ever lived is also the only person who ever fully kept God’s law. Yet in Christ we see the full meaning of God’s grace—that grace is (in the children’s acronym) God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. Forgiveness for us is complete, full, and free...”¹⁹

More attention might be given by some contemporary Bible readers, including Messianic readers, to the various acts of injustice and violence encountered in Ezekiel 22:23-31. Yet alongside of the accusations against murder, sexual sin, and oppression of others—**are accusations of Sabbath violation and dietary law violation**. For those of us in today’s Messianic community, can having a level of disregard for *Shabbat* or *kashrut* cause one to have a disregard for something like the Torah’s code of conduct regulating sexual ethics, proper business practices, or treatment of the poor? Put another way: if we paid attention to what the Torah says about the day of rest or how God’s people are to eat, **would we actually be keyed in more** to how the Torah communicates important things about how we handle our sexual activities, how we do business, or how we reach out to those in need? If indeed, some of these varied instructions often appear together, then we will have to pay attention to them, and balance them out in our lives.

¹⁹ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, pp 295, 296.