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Apocalyptic:

revealing hidden truth



I. Old Testament Apocalyptic Literature

A. Introduction

With the prophet Ezekiel, we get a great deal of a certain type of literature that is rather new to the Old Testament prophets as of his day, and that is the category of apocalyptic. There is a small amount of apocalyptic writing in the book of Isaiah, but there is a lot of it in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. What is apocalyptic? Apocalyptic is a type of literature in which hidden truth is revealed. As a prophet who is apocalyptically portraying it, God has a plan for the future—indeed a whole sense of the sweep of history and how everything will turn out—that He reveals to His prophet. The prophet, in turn, can pass that on to the people to whom God is speaking; and if it all turns out well, if God's victory is final, those who really do trust in God will be encouraged. So, it is the revealing of hidden truth that apocalyptic in particular refers to.

B. Symbolic in Nature

Symbols are used a lot in apocalyptic literature. Sometimes those symbols will be related to numbers. The prophet will predict seventy-nine or sixty-nine or fifty-nine somethings, or maybe will predict four or five somethings, or maybe there will be four horns in a vision, or maybe there will be several parts to a statue. The symbolism also comes in ways of plans and symbolic images. For example, one may see structures, like statues or trees or lampstands or strange animals, and these will stand for empires or periods of time in history.



C. Provides Encouragement

A purpose of the apocalyptic is encouragement: the Word of God that comes in this manner really tries to encourage people who may well be discouraged. In Ezekiel's day, Israel had been taken into exile. Ezekiel was a prophet of that exile. He preached during the time that the Jews were in Babylonian captivity. Any form of encouragement was welcome and needed. These were people who no longer needed to be told they were bad. They now needed to be told that God had a good plan for them, that He would not forget them—indeed that He would be completely and ultimately victorious. Apocalyptic literature also covers much time and space. It gives the big picture, and it tells you the very end of things, and sometimes even the very beginning, so it is also futuristic. There is a lot about what is going to happen and scenes of the future portrayed in one way or another in apocalyptic literature.

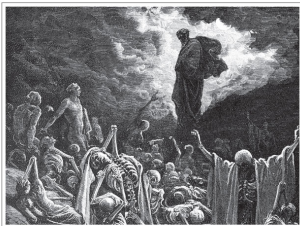
D. Visionary

Apocalyptic literature is almost always visionary; prophets are perhaps dreaming or just sent by God into a visionary state. Sometimes they are just outside somewhere and lift their eyes up and see something in the sky. The importance of these visions is almost never in the picture; the pictures are just kind of mnemonic devices or visual aids to the words—it is always the wording that is important. In the wording, comes the real essence of the truth that God has to reveal. Sometimes prophets even travel in the Spirit to one place or another. Ezekiel does that in the famous prophecy in chapter 37, where God takes him in the Spirit to the valley of dry bones, and where he sees in the way that they come together, a prediction of the resurrection of the people of God. Defeated and discouraged and beaten and exiled as a people, they have a great future, nevertheless, as the coming together of the bones indicates.

E. Angelic Interpretation

Sometimes apocalyptic literature can involve explanations by an interpreting angel. A prophet may see something and then ask an angel whom God has provided to interpret: "What does that mean? What is that I see? What does it stand for?" Then the angel will interpret that for him. This

Ezekial 37: Valley of Dry Bones



“Give up False Hope!”

happened several times with Daniel and a lot in the book of Zechariah. In the case of Ezekiel, it is God Himself who sometimes explains to Ezekiel what the significance is of what he is seeing. Not everything in the book of Ezekiel is apocalyptic, but it is important to appreciate that much of it is, and we need to be prepared for it as we look through the contents of this great book.

II. Major Themes

A. Give up False Hope

Among the major themes in the book of Ezekiel is the need to give up false hope. Why so? Ezekiel was in exile, but the exile he went into was really a predecessor of the great exile of 586 B.C. and thereafter. Because Ezekiel was taken into exile in 598 B.C., he was taken into a smaller exile, one that involved many fewer people, but was still substantial. It was an exile that followed the brief three-month siege of Jerusalem, when a person named Jehoiachin was king. Jehoiachin quickly gave up to the Babylonians, realizing that the siege would eventually defeat him and his people, and he accepted the Babylonian exile. He and many of the leaders of the nation were taken into exile. And Ezekiel, a member of a prominent family of priests, was taken with them. Ezekiel actually begins to preach in exile before the big exile starts.

The exile of 586 B.C. involved many more thousands of people than the one he had participated in. We see Ezekiel in Babylon, in captivity preaching before the rest of Judah and Jerusalem which have gone into captivity. What does he preach? Well, for 24 chapters he preaches that Jerusalem will fall and Judah will be captured. His friends and associates in exile kept trying to hold out the false hope that maybe it would not happen; maybe something would come along to weaken the Babylonians; maybe they would just not attack Jerusalem again; and maybe this time the city would be better prepared and could hold out as many years as necessary under siege, until perhaps the Egyptians would come to help them or some kind of coalition could be formed to beat off the Babylonians. But that was not God's plan, and Ezekiel—a true prophet—knew it, as God revealed it to him. He spoke again and again God's words

EZEKIEL:

Advisor to a community in exile



that it was not possible to have that hope. The hope that Jerusalem was going to thrive and succeed and be prevented from the terrible miseries of siege and conquest and exile was a false hope.

B. Advisor to Community in Exile

We also see the prophet Ezekiel functioning as an advisor to a community. He lived in a place called Tel Aviv, after which the modern Tel Aviv is named. And there in that Tel Aviv, in Babylon, he was consulted often by people: “What does the future hold? What should we do now? What should we hope for? We have heard such and such about the Babylonians, what does the Lord have to say?” And frequently people would come to him with questions, and he would then consult the Lord. He would pray, or he would wait for the Lord to give him a revelation, and God would respond that way. We also note that he frequently addresses oracles against foreign nations, just as virtually all the prophets do. In one way or another, they all have something to say about the international scene and about what God is doing in it.

C. Universal Divine Sovereignty

Another theme that is strong in Ezekiel is the theme of universal divine sovereignty. Many of the Israelites tended to believe what most ancient people believed: that gods were somewhat limited by locality, that a god was kind of regional. A god might be quite powerful in this part of the world, but if you go far away from that place to another, where that god or goddess is not worshiped much, that god or goddess wouldn’t have much influence or power. But no, this is not so. God is universal. He is everywhere; everything that happens is under His domain.

He preached for 24 chapters doom and gloom for Jerusalem and Judah, but once you come to chapter 25, the second half of the book is just the reverse. There, are all his positive prophecies, his prophecies of hope and reconciliation, because it was God’s plan to punish His people but not to extend that punishment endlessly. Once it was over, God had great things in mind.

Ezekiel 18:4

The soul who sins is the one who will die.

Israel + Judah

=

ISRAEL

Fulfillment

&

Transformation

D. Individual Responsibility

Another theme in the book is individual responsibility. People can sometimes hide behind what is happening corporately, and a lot of Israelites did that. They identified with the nation, and whichever way the nation went, that was their identification. But Ezekiel was used by God to emphasize that each individual was responsible to God, regardless of whether the society he or she lived in was good or bad.

E. Prophet of Unification

He also was a prophet of unification. Like all the other prophets, but even more commonly and in some ways more dramatically, Ezekiel predicted the days when north and south, Israel and Judah, would once again be reunited. This was not an end in itself, but rather a kind of a symbol of the real unity of God's people in the age of the Spirit—the age we now live in, where all Christians are one regardless of denomination or of location or any other thing. All true believers are part of one single people. This hope was something that God stressed often through His prophet Ezekiel. He speaks often of the Spirit of God and the power of that Spirit. We can think of God's Spirit as something subtle that is kind of individualistic. But, in fact, the Spirit of God is the power of God in the world today, working to accomplish anything God wants accomplished. So it was in Bible times, of course.

F. Fulfillment of God's Word and Transformations

Another theme is the certainty of the fulfillment of God's Word. When you study Ezekiel, you study a prophet who knows it is going to happen and who, regardless of what anybody else says, emphasizes the absolute, definite certainty that God's Word will come true. He also emphasizes that people need to be transformed. The good things that are coming in the future are not going to come to people who continue to be rebellious against God's covenant, and so Ezekiel looks forward to the time when God's people are purified, when they all turn to Him, when they are characterized by obedience to His law and love for Him as their God and in enjoyment of their wonderful position as His people.



Ezekiel 36:26-27

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws."

Toward the end of the book, he speaks of transformations. The city of Jerusalem begins to look entirely different, like nothing that it actually had in appearance in its true, regular, worldly, geographical features. It becomes a whole different place. Judah looks entirely different. Indeed the whole land of Israel changes in scope and size, and even the location of the tribes are different. And the temple is vastly different. Clearly, this prophet is not talking about the historical nation and people and city and temple that they experienced; however, he is talking about the new age in terms of the institutions of the old.

What he especially emphasizes is the presence of God. In chapter 10, Ezekiel has a vision of the glory of God leaving Jerusalem, leaving the temple. That is a terrible thing because the glory of God is what indicates His presence. It is the awesomeness that people can sense when they are at the temple that shows God has manifested Himself there in a special way. For that to depart means God's judgment is coming. But then you know, it comes back: at the end of the book, the glory of God comes back and inhabits the new temple. It is a description of the way Christ ushers in a whole new age, an age which is different from the old, an age in which people really can have a relationship with God that is so close. His people can know His presence so truly that He is, in fact, within them, that He can dwell in us by His Spirit.

G. Presence of God

Another great theme in the book is the theme of the presence of God. In chapter 10, Ezekiel sees that presence leaving the people of God. He sees it in the form of the glory of God departing the temple and going away. This is an awful thing. This is God abandoning His people, which, in effect, He did. Of course, He did not do it forever, and He did not do it in a way that left them with no hope. When that glory does return after the exile, as Ezekiel describes it in chapter 43, he sees the glory of God return to the temple, symbolizing God's presence in a newer and more wonderful way than ever before. And that is the age we live in, where the presence of God is with us in a way that no one in the Old Testament ever experienced. We have it now, every one of us who knows Christ. We have God living in us, present with us by His Spirit.

ORGANIZATION OF EZEKIEL:

Judgment on Jerusalem
and Judah (Chapters 1–24)

ORGANIZATION OF EZEKIEL:

Oracles Against Foreign
Nations (Chapters 25–32)

ORGANIZATION OF EZEKIEL:

Hope Offered
(Chapters 33–39)

III. Structure of the Book

Ezekiel is organized into four very easy to describe blocks of material.

A. Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah (1:1-24:27)

In the first half of the book, chapters 1-24, there are many, many ways that Ezekiel describes how Jerusalem and Judah must fall to the Babylonians. Those chapters are from the period of time prior to 586 B.C., when the city did fall.

B. Oracles Against Foreign Nations (25:1-32:32)

Then come a series of prophecies in chapters 25-32 that are oracles against foreign nations. Like other prophets, Ezekiel is inspired to speak of the plan of God to take good care of all those nations over time that have opposed the people of Israel in the process of establishing for Himself a people who will, in fact, reign on the earth with Christ. The oracles against foreign nations are part and parcel of typical prophetic activity, and in Ezekiel 25-32 we find many of them—God’s people delivered by the removal from the scene of those nations that have oppressed them.

C. Hope Offered (33:1-39:29)

In chapters 33-39, hope is offered; and this is hope after the fall, as it were, hope after the fall of Jerusalem and the exile. In various ways, God’s good purposes and plans for His people are described in those chapters.

D. Visions of the Future (40:1-48:35)

The most visionary and futuristic part of the book, chapters 40-48, contain visions of the future—including especially the new Jerusalem, the new Judah, and the new temple. In other words, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!” The age to come is going to be very, very different from anything anybody has experienced, and that symbolizes the life in Christ, and even heavenly existence that is still in the future for all of us. Ezekiel understood something that all the prophets understood and that was that history has its turning points—a God of history makes changes.

Continuity of History

1. The Patriarchs: 2200–1800 BC
2. Slavery, Exodus, Wandering, and Conquest: 1800–1390 BC
3. The Judges: 1390–1050 BC
4. Rise and Development of the Monarchy: 1050–931 BC
5. The Divided Kingdom and Exile: 931–538 BC

PROPHETIC LAMENT FORM

IV. Major Topics

A. Continuity of History

Ezekiel understands also that Israel is a continuum. As those changes come and go, we are not seeing God abandoning Israel and choosing some other people. We are seeing God abandoning Israel, teaching them a lesson, forcing them into exile and all the miseries thereof—but also coming back to that same people, even though, of course, it is perhaps children or grandchildren or great grandchildren. The people are a continuum. So they are always you; they are always that same nation. This follows what Moses did. Moses, when he preached to the Israelites, could say things like: “You are here now, just as you were here when we came out of Egypt, just as you were in Egypt for hundreds of years in bondage. But you will live in this land a long time, and then you will be taken into exile. Then when you finally come to your senses and turn to the Lord, you will be able to return and enjoy God’s blessing again.”

In other words, the audience he was speaking to, in some sense, embodied the whole continuity of the history of the nation of Israel; and the whole nation is a unity that embodies and experiences whatever happens at any point. God treats His people as a continuum. Ezekiel often reflects that, so he can have predictions of things way into the future and encourage that group, his listeners who otherwise would be sort of beaten down and defeated and discouraged, by those words and predictions of things that would not happen in their lifetimes but were surely going to come, and in which they could rejoice as long as they loved God and sensed themselves as part of His people.

B. Prophetic Lament Form

One of the interesting things about Ezekiel is that he uses the prophetic lament form frequently. Chapters 19, 27, 30, and 32 have such laments. Let me read from Ezekiel 19 to demonstrate how this works. The lament form that is used by many, many of the prophets, but particularly well by Ezekiel, is a form in which the prophet imagines that he is having to deliver the funeral oration for someone who has died. God gives him the words to speak at that funeral, and so we call these also funerary laments to distinguish



Judah



EGYPT



Judah



BABYLON



them from the kind of lament in the book of Lamentations or a lament psalm, which are appeals for help in times of distress.

These are funerary laments in which the prophet is kind of singing a song that sadly looks back at what happened to someone. Now, “the someone” is never an individual; “the someone” is, in fact, a nation. In chapter 19, “the someone” is actually “someones.” It is Israel’s population as manifested in Israel; and Judah and various kings are spoken of as lions and the nation as a lioness, and so we read this: “What a lioness was your mother among the lions! She lay down among the young lions and reared her cubs. She brought up one of her cubs, and he became a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men. The nations heard about him; he was trapped in their pit. They led him with hooks to the land of Egypt.” That is referring to the captivity, of a small one that was perpetrated on Judah by the Egyptians in 605 B.C.

They, in a kind of a very brief encounter in warfare in Judah, took the king and some of the nobility captive into Egypt. So he says, “When she saw her hope unfulfilled”—that was not going anywhere, that was an end of things—“her expectation is gone, she took another of her cubs and made him a strong lion. He prowled among the lions, for he was now a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men. He broke down their strongholds and devastated their towns. The land and all in it were terrified of his roaring. Then the nations came against him, those from regions around about. They spread their net for him, and he was trapped in their pit. With hooks they pulled him into a cage and brought him to the king of Babylon. They put him in prison . . .” That is Jehoiachin, the last legitimate king of the Judeans, who was captured by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar and taken into exile along with Ezekiel.

Then he goes on to say, “Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard”—he is speaking like giving the eulogy, telling about great things in the past and how they are now gone—“planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water. Its branches were strong, fit for a ruler’s scepter. It towered high above the thick foliage, conspicuous for its height and its many branches. But it was



uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground. The east wind made it shrivel. Stripped of its fruit, its strong branches withered, and fire consumed them. Now it is planted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land. Fire spread from one of its main branches and consumed its fruit. No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler's scepter."

There we see the lament speaking of Israel in terms of two kings and how they are taken away. And then Israel is spoken of in terms of a beautiful vine that had abundance, but that was all taken away. And it was removed and planted in the desert where, of course, a vine cannot grow very well, thus symbolizing the exile of Israel. These laments should have, and we hope did at least in a few cases, moved the people to want to repent. The purpose was to move people to seek God, to say, "Yes, we have died as a people. Yes, things have gone wrong for us."

C. Valley of the Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37, perhaps the most famous passage in the book, has the same concept behind it. God's Spirit brings Ezekiel to a valley where there are all kinds of bones, representing an army that was killed in battle and now has been long dead, and there are just bones everywhere in this valley where the battle took place. As Ezekiel prophesies the Word of God to them and as the Spirit of God inhabits them (you have the Word of God and God's Spirit working) these bones come to life. Skeletons are put back together, and sinews come on them, and flesh covers them and they stand up, and they are the whole army of Israel, a great army. They say, according to this passage, "We are long dead; all hope is gone for us." But God says, "This is symbolizing the fact that I'm going to open your graves and bring you up from them. I am going to bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord." That is the hope of the book of Ezekiel, that Israel will once again know their Lord.

