

A CRITIQUE OF PROPHECY
EZEKIEL 12:21 - 14:23

YHWH's word will come to pass

21The word of YHWH came to me: **22**Son of man, what is this proverb of yours about the land of Israel, which says, "The days are prolonged, and every vision comes to nothing"?

23Tell them therefore, "Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will put an end to this proverb, and they shall use it no more as a proverb in Israel." But say to them, The days are near, and the fulfillment of every vision.

24For there shall no longer be any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel.

25But I YHWH will speak the word that I speak, and it will be fulfilled. It will no longer be delayed; but in your days, O rebellious house, I will speak the word and fulfill it, says the Lord YHWH.

26The word of YHWH came to me: **27**Son of man, the house of Israel is saying, "The vision that he sees is for many years ahead; he prophesies for distant times."

28So, then, say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: None of my words will be delayed any longer, but the word that I speak will be fulfilled, says the Lord YHWH.

In the entire scroll, Ezekiel is called a 'prophet' only once (2:5, repeated 33:33). Traditionally a prophet was seen as a sign of the presence, the word and the action of YHWH (see 2Kings 5:8,15). However, it should not be surprising that the fall of Jerusalem in 586 provoked a crisis in the understanding and acceptance of prophecy. After all Jeremiah was the only one who warned of the fall. All the others, who claimed to be prophets and who were accepted as such by the people, kept assuring the people that all would be well. They were shown to be wrong. They prophesied 'peace'. They based their conviction of the impossibility of Babylon and its god conquering YHWH and capturing YHWH's city, and their message was welcomed. Jeremiah, on the other hand, was laughed at and considered a traitor.

Verse 22 neatly sums up the attitude that prevailed in Judah in the years leading up to the capture of the city. The more time passed, the more it seemed obvious to the people that the visions that Jeremiah claimed, and the words of warning that he uttered, were nothing more than words, the ravings of a man who did not believe in YHWH. They were wrong.

Now in exile, Ezekiel is facing the same cynicism. As we have seen, he has been warning the people that worse is to happen to Jerusalem and its inhabitants. The passing of time – so many believed – showed him to be mistaken. Here in verses 23-25 Ezekiel insists that the 'word' that YHWH is speaking through Ezekiel 'will be fulfilled. It will no longer be delayed'. It will be fulfilled 'in your days'(verse 25).

Verses 26-28 look in the other direction. Here Ezekiel is addressing those living in exile who are overwhelmed with grief that the hoped-for and promised restoration has not come about. They are tempted to disregard the prophetic promise. Ezekiel is assuring them that the word of YHWH is faithful. The restoration will come to pass.

Ezekiel is not the first to criticise those who claim to speak from God but do not. Amos did not want to be associated with those who claimed to be prophets (see Amos 7:14). Hosea speaks of the prophet who ‘stumbles in the dark’ (4:5). Isaiah criticises prophets who ‘err in vision’ and ‘stumble in giving judgment’ (28:7). They prattle on and say nothing of value (28:10). Micah has this to say (3:5-7).

Thus says YHWH concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.

Again and again Jeremiah denounces the false prophets who say what people want to hear with no regard for YHWH. The following are but a few examples: ‘The prophets are nothing but wind for the word is not in them’ (5:13). ‘The prophets are prophesying lies in my name’ (14:14). ‘The prophets are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of YHWH ... I did not send the prophets yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied’ (23:16,21).

Prophecy, says Ezekiel, is not something that comes from the prophet’s own ‘heart’. A prophet must ‘hear the word of YHWH’ (verse 2). A prophet is not to follow his own ‘spirit’. A prophet must see what God is revealing (verse 3). When a breach occurs in the people’s faith in YHWH, the prophet is not to be like a jackal which takes advantage of the breach to attack and ruin the vineyard. The prophet is to stand in the breach to protect the vineyard, and to repair the wall (verses 4-5).

In verses 6-7, Ezekiel utters a terrible critique of those who claim to be prophets but who are not sent by YHWH, and so see a false vision and utter lies. His words echo the critique of Jeremiah.

¹The word of YHWH came to me: ²Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are prophesying; say to those who prophesy out of their own heart: “Hear the word of YHWH!”

³Thus says the Lord YHWH: Alas for the senseless prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!

⁴Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel. ⁵You have not gone up into the breaches, or repaired a wall for the house of Israel, so that it might stand in battle on the day of YHWH.

⁶They have envisioned falsehood and lying divination; they say, “Says YHWH,” when YHWH has not sent them, and yet they wait for the fulfillment of their word!

⁷Have you not seen a false vision or uttered a lying divination, when you have said, “Says YHWH,” even though I did not speak?

⁸Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Because you have uttered falsehood and envisioned lies, I am against you, says the Lord YHWH. ⁹My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord YHWH.

¹⁰Because, in truth, because they have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it.

¹¹Say to those who smear whitewash on it that it shall fall. There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind will break out. ¹²When the wall falls, will it not be said to you, "Where is the whitewash you smeared on it?" ¹³Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: In my wrath I will make a stormy wind break out, and in my anger there shall be a deluge of rain, and hailstones in wrath to destroy it. ¹⁴I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare; when it falls, you shall perish within it; and you shall know that I am YHWH.

¹⁵Thus I will spend my wrath upon the wall, and upon those who have smeared it with whitewash; and I will say to you, The wall is no more, nor those who smeared it— ¹⁶the prophets of Israel who prophesied concerning Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for it, when there was no peace, says the Lord YHWH.

After summarising the sinful behaviour of the false prophets in verse 9, the details of their punishment is expressed in verse 10. God's mighty hand that liberated the Israelites from Egypt is now turned against the false prophets. God confides the intimate mystery of his will to true prophets. False prophets will be excluded from this council. They will not be enrolled in the registers of the people. It will be as though they never existed. They will not be named in YHWH's 'book of the living' (Psalm 69:28). They will be refused entry into the Promised Land.

In verses 10-14, false prophets are likened to builders who seek to cover over the cracks in a wall with whitewash. This makes the wall look secure, but it will prove perilous to anyone who is deceived into relying on it.

YHWH declares that he is going to cause the wall to collapse. Those who rely on it, and the false prophets who have covered up the faults instead of issuing the warning that God wants, will perish when the wall collapses on them.

The Older Testament knows of women who are called ‘prophets’, women such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Huldah (2Kings 22:14). In this text Ezekiel is not referring to genuine prophets, but to women dealing with magical spells. He criticises them for ‘prophesying’, like the false male prophets, ‘out of their own hearts’(verse 17; compare 13:2), instead of relaying the word of YHWH.

The binding and loosing described in verse 18 appears to be referring to the power these women exercise over people’s life or death. If, without regards for YHWH’s will, they pronounce a verdict of death, YHWH will pronounce the same verdict over them (verse 18). They have pronounced what is untrue in YHWH’s name, and what is more they have done so for payment (verse 19).

They will suffer the consequences of their deeds. In this way YHWH will ‘save the people from your hands’(verse 21), and they will learn that ‘I am YHWH’: they will learn that he is the one who hears the cry of the poor and is determined to save his people from those who would enslave them (see Exodus 3:7-8).

This message is reinforced in verses 22-23.

¹⁷As for you, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own hearts; prophesy against them ¹⁸and say, Thus says the Lord YHWH: Woe to the women who sew bands on all wrists, and make veils for the heads of persons of every height, in the hunt for human lives! Will you hunt down lives among my people, and maintain your own lives? ¹⁹You have profaned me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, putting to death persons who should not die and keeping alive persons who should not live, by your lies to my people, who listen to lies.

²⁰Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: I am against your bands with which you hunt lives; I will tear them from your arms, and let the lives go free, the lives that you hunt down like birds. ²¹I will tear off your veils, and save my people from your hands; they shall no longer be prey in your hands; and you shall know that I am YHWH.

²²Because you have disheartened the righteous falsely, although I have not disheartened them, and you have encouraged the wicked not to turn from their wicked way and save their lives; ²³therefore you shall no longer see false visions or practice divination; I will save my people from your hand. Then you will know that I am YHWH.

¹Certain elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me.

²And the word of YHWH came to me:

³Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and placed their stumbling block of iniquity before them; shall I let myself be consulted by them?

⁴Therefore speak to them, and say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: Any of those of the house of Israel who take their idols into their hearts and place their stumbling block of iniquity before them, and yet come to the prophet—I YHWH will answer them – coming with the multitude of their idols – ⁵in order that I may take hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, all of whom are estranged from me through their idols.

⁶Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord YHWH: Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations.

⁷For any of those of the house of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who separate themselves from me, taking their idols into their hearts and placing their stumbling block of iniquity before them, and yet come to a prophet to inquire of me by him, I YHWH will answer them myself. ⁸I will set my face against them; I will make them a sign and a byword and cut them off from the midst of my people; and you shall know that I am YHWH.

As in 8:1, the community leaders have come to Ezekiel, a recognised prophet, seeking an oracle.

Without detailing the nature of the sin for which the elders are responsible, verses 2-3 speak of 'iniquity' and having false gods in their 'hearts'. 'Stumbling block of iniquity' translates a phrase found only in Ezekiel. He sometimes uses it of idols (7:19; 14:3), and sometimes of unrepented transgressions in general (18:30). They have chosen to act outside the covenant. What are they doing seeking (שׁוֹרֵר) a word from YHWH?

YHWH begins his response with a formula typical of the Torah (verse 4; see Leviticus 20:2). The Torah is clear: 'You shall not have any gods before me' (Exodus 20:3). YHWH will answer them because he chooses to do so, but not in the way they are hoping for. He will answer them with the punishment required by the Torah.

In verse 6 the prophecy begins. It is a call to 'repent', which introduces hope for deliverance. Their situation is seriously bad, but not beyond redemption.

Verse 7 addresses everyone in the community, including resident foreigners. Verse 8 spells out the punishment. To be 'cut off from the midst of the people' has a precise meaning in the formulation of the Torah. Those responsible for certain crimes were not punished by the community. Rather, they were excluded from the sacred protection provided by the community, and so left exposed to divine punishment. Those named in this category were assured that God would terminate their line, and, when they died they would not join their ancestors. There was, of course, no way of verifying this threat, but it was a powerful deterrent (see Exodus 12:19; Leviticus 7:20). They would be a warning to others. Their fame would be their shame.

In verse 9 we are told of the punishment inflicted on a ‘prophet’ who dares to utter a word in YHWH’s name that does not come from YHWH. This is an extreme form of the second commandment: ‘You shall not make wrongful use of the name of YHWH your God, for YHWH will not acquit anyone who misuses his name’ (Exodus 20:7). Like the idolaters of verses 3-8, the false prophet will be ‘cut off’ from the people (verse 9; see verse 8).

Verse 10 covers both the inquirer who has idols in his heart, and the false prophet who utters oracles without receiving the word of God. They are cut off from the people so that ‘the house of Israel may no longer go astray from me’.

Finally YHWH will renew the covenant (verse 11; see 11:20). This, and not punishment, is the goal of God’s judgment.

⁹If a prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, YHWH, am deceiving that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him, and will cut him off from the midst of my people Israel.

¹⁰And they shall bear their punishment—the punishment of the inquirer and the punishment of the prophet shall be the same— ¹¹so that the house of Israel may no longer go astray from me, nor defile themselves any more with all their transgressions. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God, says the Lord YHWH.

¹²The word of YHWH came to me:

¹³Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its staff of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it human beings and animals, ¹⁴even if Noah, Daniel, and Job, these three, were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness, says the Lord YHWH.

¹⁵If I send wild animals through the land to ravage it, so that it is made desolate, and no one may pass through because of the animals; ¹⁶even if these three men were in it, as I live, says the Lord YHWH, they would save neither sons nor daughters; they alone would be saved, but the land would be desolate.

¹⁷Or if I bring a sword upon that land and say, 'Let a sword pass through the land,' and I cut off human beings and animals from it; ¹⁸though these three men were in it, as I live, says the Lord YHWH, they would save neither sons nor daughters, but they alone would be saved.

¹⁹Or if I send a pestilence into that land, and pour out my wrath upon it with blood, to cut off humans and animals from it; ²⁰even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, says the Lord YHWH, they would save neither son nor daughter; they would save only their own lives by their righteousness.

Verses 12-20 introduce a separate 'word' received by Ezekiel from YHWH. It is general in nature referring to any 'land'. Verse 13 lists four kinds of punishment (compare 5:16-17). The number 4 stands for the totality of divine judgment. This is the second time the verb 'sin' (סָחַף) has been used by Ezekiel (see 3:21). It means 'to miss the mark' (see Judges 20:16 of a sling shot).

Verse 14 has similarities with Jeremiah 15:1-3, but whereas Jeremiah speaks of Moses and Samuel, Ezekiel speaks of three non-Israelite figures from the legendary past (verse 14). Noah is the just man who was saved from the great flood (Genesis 6:9). He was, however, unable to prevent it. Daniel (דָּנִיֵּאל) was a wise and good Phoenician king from the ancient past – not the Daniel (דָּנִיֵּאל) of the Book of that name in the Bible. Job is a third just man who was delivered by God (see Job 42). These three were saved by God because of their righteousness (יָשָׁרָם), but they saved 'only their own lives'. Ezekiel knows of the power of intercession that is part of the prophet's call (see 9:8; 11:13; 13:5). However, just as one person who is 'pure' does not allow entry into the temple of another who is 'impure', so one person's righteousness does not substitute for another person's unrighteousness.

This point is underlined in verses 15-20. Even if these three just men were in the land, they would themselves be saved, but they would not avert divine punishment from the unjust inhabitants.

Verse 21 applies the general statement of verse 12-20 to Jerusalem.

In verse 22 we are told that some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem will survive the collapse of the city. They will come to Babylon to join the exiles. They will demonstrate for the exiles just how bad was the behaviour of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This will show the exiles whom Ezekiel is addressing how just YHWH was in destroying the city.

²¹For thus says the Lord YHWH: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four deadly acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild animals, and pestilence, to cut off humans and animals from it!

²²Yet, survivors shall be left in it, sons and daughters who will be brought out; they will come out to you. When you see their ways and their deeds, you will be consoled for the evil that I have brought upon Jerusalem, for all that I have brought upon it.

²³They shall console you, when you see their ways and their deeds; and you shall know that it was not without cause that I did all that I have done in it, says the Lord YHWH.

