

The Fiery Sword Unsheathed

God's Unstoppable, Inevitable Judgment and his Messiah

A

- 1 ⁴⁵ And the word of the Lord came to me:¹ ⁴⁶ "Son of man, set your face toward the southland; preach against the south, and prophesy against the forest land in the Negeb. ⁴⁷ Say to the forest of the Negeb, Hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it.
- 2 ^{21:1} The word of the Lord came to me: ² "Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries. Prophesy against the land of Israel ³ and say to the land of Israel, Thus says the Lord: Behold, I am against you and will draw my sword from its sheath and will cut off from you both righteous and wicked. ⁴ Because I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked, therefore my sword shall be drawn from its sheath against all flesh from south to north.
- 3 ⁶ "As for you, son of man, groan; with breaking heart and bitter grief, groan before their eyes. ⁷ And when they say to you, 'Why do you groan?' you shall say, 'Because of the news that it is coming.
- 4 ⁸ And the word of the Lord came to me: ⁹ "Son of man, prophesy and say, Thus says the Lord, say: "A sword, a sword is sharpened and also polished, ¹⁰ sharpened for slaughter, polished to flash like lightning! (Or shall we rejoice? You have despised the rod, my son, with everything of wood.) ¹¹ So the sword is given to be polished, that it may be grasped in the hand. It is sharpened and polished to be given into the hand of the slayer.
- 5 ¹⁴ "As for you, son of man, prophesy. Clap your hands and let the sword come down twice, yes, three times, the sword for those to be slain. It is

B

- ⁴⁸ All flesh shall see that I the Lord have kindled it; it shall not be quenched." ⁴⁹ Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! They are saying of me, 'Is he not a maker of parables?'"
- ⁵ And all flesh shall know that I am the Lord. I have drawn my sword from its sheath; it shall not be sheathed again.
- Every heart will melt, and all hands will be feeble; every spirit will faint, and all knees will be weak as water. Behold, it is coming, and it will be fulfilled,' " declares the Lord God.
- ¹² Cry out and wail, son of man, for it is against my people. It is against all the princes of Israel. They are delivered over to the sword with my people. Strike therefore upon your thigh. ¹³ For it will not be a testing—what could it do if you despise the rod?" declares the Lord God.
- ¹⁷ I also will clap my hands, and I will satisfy my fury; I the Lord have spoken."

¹ Curiously, Block sets this chapter up (at least its beginning) as two columns as well, though he aligns them in a different way. See Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 666–68.

the sword for the great slaughter, which surrounds them, ¹⁵that their hearts may melt, and many stumble. At all their gates I have given the glittering sword. Ah, it is made like lightning; it is taken up for slaughter. ¹⁶Cut sharply to the right; set yourself to the left, wherever your face is directed.

- 6 ¹⁸The word of the Lord came to me again: ¹⁹“As for you, son of man, mark two ways for the sword of the king of Babylon to come. Both of them shall come from the same land. And make a signpost; make it at the head of the way to a city. ²⁰Mark a way for the sword to come to Rabbah of the Ammonites and to Judah, into Jerusalem the fortified. ²¹For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination. He shakes the arrows; he consults the teraphim; he looks at the liver. ²²Into his right hand comes the divination for Jerusalem, to set battering rams, to open the mouth with murder, to lift up the voice with shouting, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up mounds, to build siege towers.
- 7 ²⁸“And you, son of man, prophesy, and say, Thus says the Lord God concerning the Ammonites and concerning their reproach; say, A sword, a sword is drawn for the slaughter. It is polished to consume and to flash like lightning— ²⁹while they see for you false visions, while they divine lies for you—to place you on the necks of the profane wicked, whose day has come, the time of their final punishment. ³⁰Return it to its sheath. In the place where you were created, in the land of your origin, I will judge you.

²³But to them it will seem like a false divination. They have sworn solemn oaths, but he brings their guilt to remembrance, that they may be taken. ²⁴“Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have made your guilt to be remembered, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear—because you have come to remembrance, you shall be taken in hand. ²⁵And you, O profane wicked one, prince of Israel, whose day has come, the time of your final punishment, ²⁶thus says the Lord God: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted. ²⁷A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make it. This also shall not be, until he comes, the one to whom judgment belongs, and I will give it to him.

³¹And I will pour out my indignation upon you; I will blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and I will deliver you into the hands of brutish men, skillful to destroy. ³²You shall be fuel for the fire. Your blood shall be in the midst of the land. You shall be no more remembered, for I the Lord have spoken.”

Ezekiel 20:45-21:32

A Blazing Vision of the End

It's 2009 and you've just sat down for your Friday night movie with your popcorn and date. The movie is called *Knowing* and it was produced by a studio called Ezekiel

Films. It stars Nicolas Cage as a widowed professor grappling with grief and a universe that suddenly feels anything but random. It opens almost nostalgically, in 1959 and a school time capsule ceremony. Most kids draw bright, happy futures. But one girl, Lucinda, freezes in a trance. As her eyes go distant, she begins scribbling page after page of numbers. No pictures of tomorrow. Just relentless and unyielding digits.

Fifty years later, that sheet finds its way to the professor. At first glance it looks like chaos. But as he **decodes it**, he discovers an emerging pattern of terrifying clarity consisting of dates, places, and exact death tolls or every major catastrophe since 1959 including plane crashes, quakes, and acts of terror. Perfect matches. Only a few entries remain, ticking toward events yet to unfold.

He dives in, desperate to understand, then to warn and try to stop what's coming. But the numbers are unyielding. They unfold precisely as foretold. Meanwhile, his young son begins waking to visions that chill the blood to the bone: a vast **forest suddenly ablaze, trees cracking** and splitting in the heat, animals fleeing in panic as flames devour every green branch and every dry thicket alike. The fire makes no

distinction. **There is no escape.** The entire woodland is swallowed whole.

As the tension mounts, these visions begin bleeding into reality. The final predictions surface, not of scattered disasters, but of the apocalypse. A solar cataclysm. A **wall of fire** sweeping the globe. All cities are vaporized. The earth's surface is scorched to barren silence and ash.

Now, woven through the horror are these quiet, haunting threads of pale figures in long coats who appear only to certain children, marking them with smooth black stones, guiding them from the inferno. Likely a nod to the studio's name, the "**whisper people**" echo the cherubim-like beings of Ezekiel 1, while the overall setup of prophetic visions of fiery global destruction with **a chosen remnant** preserved for a new beginning riffs on Ezekiel's role as a watchman who prophesies judgment on a corrupt world.

The story lingers, pressing close with questions we usually suppress: What if the end is scripted rather than chance? What if warnings have whispered through the ages—hidden in plain sight—and we've called them mere stories? What if **the fire spares nothing** we've built, nothing we cling to ... except, perhaps, a remnant chosen for a world remade?

That same ache of inevitability, that clash of judgment and faint renewal, pulses through Ezekiel's lamentations and judgments against Judah. The ancient prophet once faced a **people convinced of their security, who dismissed his words** as riddles. But God handed him a message sharp as a blade and pure as flame. God's Judgment would kindle and consume, leaving no exemptions and no bargains.

Today, let's sit in that tension. Because even in the roar of the fire, in the heart of what seems final, God's Word refuses to end in ashes. It points to something deeper, **something that outlasts the blaze**. But only if you can see past the riddles that are actually as clear as day for those with eyes to see.

Understanding Ezekiel 21: The Sword Song Unveiled

Our passage is **Ezekiel 21**. However, a word needs to be said about exactly **what that means**, because in the numbering of the Masoretic text, Ch. 21 actually begins in **20:45** and thus also contains the last five verses of that chapter. In this case, the Masoretic has the numbering better, for two reasons. First, there is a *Petuhah* (פ) marker after **20:44**, showing that the next section begins a new thought. Second, **vv. 45** and onward fit the *two column* weave rather than the

three column weave of the previous chapter. This **two column** structure goes all the way through ch. 21. Therefore, it is all one natural unit, just as the Hebrew marker indicates.

It is **divided into seven rows** made up of what Daniel Block calls a “**quartet of oracles**”:

- a. The riddle of the sword (21:1–12 [Eng. 20:45–21:7])
- b. The song of the sword (21:13–22 [Eng. 21:8–17])
- c. The agent of the sword (21:23–32 [Eng. 21:18–27])
- d. The taunt of the sword (21:33–37 [Eng. 21:28–32])²

The first thing we see is a prediction of **universal indiscriminate fire** that is coming for “**the southland.**” It comes as a **parable**, as we’ve seen in previous chapters. The next four rows show intensifying focus on Jerusalem through a sign-act, a sharpening song, a threefold strike, and Babylon’s arrow. It climaxes on leadership and **spillover of judgment** to one of the nations around Israel—foreshadowing the third major section of the book and God’s judgment against the nations (**25:1-32:32**).

The **columns** are tight. The **left** (A) tells the prophet’s commission to pronounce vivid, escalating images of destruction. The **right** (B) shows the inexorable consequence of God’s wrath.

² Block, 659.

There appears to be a kind of **ring structure**, when you understand that the chapter begins back in **21:45**, for it both *begins and ends* in fire. While it isn't perfectly chiastic, it does have a kind of center with a sharp flashing sword unsheathed against Israel, making the whole story have a feeling of deep impending dread and doom.

A – Fire kindled (unquenchable forest blaze) (20:45–48)

B – People dismiss it as parable (20:49)

C – Sword drawn & explained (groaning) (21:1–7)

X – **Sword sharpened & flashing (climax of dread) (21:8–17)**

C' – Sword applied (prince overturned → hope hint) (21:18–27)

D – Ammon also faces the sword (21:28–30)

A' – Fire returns (Ammon becomes fuel; total erasure) (21:31–32)

All Consuming Fire: God's Judgment Unfolds

Row 1 – The Riddle Ignited

We begin with the **Word of the Lord** coming to Ezekiel (**Ezek 20:45**). The Lord tells him, “**Son of Man, set your face toward the southland; preach against the south, and prophesy against the forest land in the Negeb**” (46). Recall that Ezekiel is in Babylon. From his perspective, Israel is to his

south (especially as the invading army of Babylon would attack from the north). So this is a natural and easy to understand posture. But the [forest of the Negeb](#) is tougher, since today, this is a mostly barren wasteland, save for the sparse vegetation in the most northern regions. But it was not always so, and therefore while never a deep dark forest like you might think of, there were plenty of trees for the image to work.

The prophet is now supposed to [speak to the forest](#). “Hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it.” (47). You can hear why I might have thought of that movie *Knowing* as I described it earlier when I read this. Ezekiel and that movie are depicting something very similar.

But, of course, it [isn't identical](#). In the movie, you have these cryptic numbers just scribbled down on a page by someone who has gone into a trance. But here, you have a very sober and easy to understand text delivered by a prophet who is lucid and aware. In the movie, there is no

ultimate cause for the end of the world. It's just the meaningless mindless cold of the universe doing what it does. Not here. Never that in the Bible. *God is kindling a fire*. And he tells them about it before hand that they might know.

In fact, this is precisely what the B column begins by saying and will continue to say until the end of the chapter. “*All flesh shall see that I the Lord have kindled it; it shall not be quenched*” (48). That's *the main point* about telling them ahead of time—so that they might know that it was God who sent the fire.

But look at how *vs. 49* ends the previous chapter. “*Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! They are saying of me, ‘Is he not a maker of parables (mēmaššēl mēšālīm)?’*” or better, a “*prattler of parables.*” We've seen this word before where the people used it to discredit and discount Ezekiel (12:22; 18:2). But now, “*they ridicule Ezekiel,*” effectively saying, “*Do not worry with the man ... he is just a story-teller.*”³

But now here is some *incredible irony* as it regards my opening story and one that nicely illustrates that in fact, as this entire long second part of Ezekiel began by saying, “*You live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear; for*

³ Timothy Polk, “[Paradigms, Parables, and ‘Mēšālīm’: On Reading the ‘Māšāl’ in Scripture,](#)” *CBQ* 45.4 (Oct 1983): 564-83.

they are a rebellious house” (12:2). What is completely and truly cryptic in the movie are random numbers written 50 years earlier by little girl who inexplicably goes into a trance. Yet, the scientist is able to figure out that they have meaning and even what that meaning is. Yet here, in what is very clear language, Israel, who should know better, is the reverse. They take clear divine communication and reduce it to hidden and unreliable riddles in order to evade accountability and responsibility for their rebellion. I’m going to come back to this same idea a bit later.

But I want to reinforce to you the seriousness of what you’ve just heard. I’m reminded of the astonishing exchange this week in congress when Senator Hawley repeatedly asked OB/GYN Dr. Verma if men can get pregnant. She blathered and stuttered over herself—for five straight minutes—and could not answer the question. She turned the simplest of all questions into what she called “a political tool” of “polarization.” In other words, the most obvious fact in the physical world has literally become a riddle to her because of her sin.⁴ That’s Israel as it hears God’s word. Ezekiel is told to prophecy to a very specific and known place about a fire that will destroy absolutely everything in its

⁴ Here’s a link to this astounding exchange. Josh Hawley (R-MO), “[Can men get pregnant?](#)” C-SPAN (Jan 14, 2025).

path. And even if one wanted to say that the trees are metaphorical and obtuse, the prophet deciphers it for them by calling them “**all faces from south to north.**” In other words, God is coming to obliterate the people.

And, of course, we’ve seen this all before, which makes their own puzzlement all the more spectacularly absurd. In Ezek 15, God compared Judah to a vine whose fate is to be **thrown into the fire** (15:4-6). In 16, God told them that their houses would be **burned with fire** (16:41). In 19, the vine is uprooted, cast down, and **fire goes out** from the stem to consume its fruit (19:14). So this is nothing like deciphering pages full of random numbers that you have no reason to think are even meaningful. It is as clear as whether a man can get pregnant.

Row 2 – The Groans of the Watchman

At any rate, **Ezekiel reminds the Lord** now that this is how they are responding to his word. Of course, this is mostly for our sake, not for God who already knows it. But it allows for the big progression of the chapter to begin. **21:1** begins the same way as **20:45**, “**The Word of the Lord came to me...**” “**Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries. Prophecy against the land of**

Israel” (2). There’s not even a hint of parable now. You couldn’t get any more blunt and direct. Speak to Jerusalem and its sanctuaries.

What sanctuaries? Many scholars believe this is a scribal error and that the plural should be singular—sanctuary, i.e. the temple. However, it is quite possible that the sanctuaries in mind are pagan centers of worship in Jerusalem! Either way, it’s all going to fall.

“And say to the land of Israel, Thus says the Lord: Behold, I am against you and will draw my sword from its sheath and will cut off from you both righteous and wicked” (21:3). This gives **the clear interpretation of “parable.”** Jerusalem is the Negev, the fire is the sword that is coming, while the righteous are the green trees and the wicked are the dry trees. And what will happen? Complete, indiscriminate devastation. “**Because I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked, therefore my sword shall be drawn from its sheath against all flesh from south to north**” (4). All flesh refers here to everyone in Judah-Israel, north to south, Jerusalem and its temple, good guys, bad guys. Everyone dies! God is un-sheathing **his sword** and drawing it against his people. Now, “his sword” is a theme that we will have more to say about later, but for now, this ends the very same way the previous

section did, with column B: “And all flesh shall know that I am the Lord” (5a). Previously, “I the LORD have kindled [the fire].” Now, “I have drawn my sword from its sheath” (5b). Previously, “It shall not be quenched.” Now, “It shall not be sheathed again” (5c). It’s the same thing told with two different metaphors: **fire and sword**. The Word of God is angry. The LORD is about to show his people just how angry he is.

Row 3 – The Sharpened Song of Slaughter

The **third row** presents itself with a **kind of song**, not a formal one like ch. 19s lament. But an informal one, one where you can imagine your own lyrics. “As for you, son of man, **groan**; with breaking heart and bitter grief, groan before their eyes. And when they say to you, ‘Why do you groan?’ you shall say, ‘Because of the news that it is coming’” (6-7a). Notice the **heart** and the **eyes**. This is paralleled in the B column’s response, “‘Every *heart* will melt, and all *hands* will be feeble; every spirit will faint, and all *knees* will be weak as water. Behold, it is coming, and it will be fulfilled,’ declares the Lord God” (7b). What is seen before their eyes now causes their **hands** to become feeble and their **knees** to collapse. Such is the content of the groans and grief that the

prophet is to bear before his own people in Babylon. That is the “[news that is coming...](#)” And the news that comes will be fulfilled by the Lord God.

Row 4 – Clapping for the Triple Strike

The [fourth row](#) comes on its heels as a kind of lyric of the groan. Again [the Word of the LORD](#) comes to the prophet (8). He tells the son of man to prophesy. “[Thus says the Lord, say: “A sword, a sword is sharpened and also polished...”](#) (9). Sword is mentioned twice for emphasis. The sword is being [sharpened and polished](#). For what? And why? It is “[sharpened for slaughter...](#)” (10a). The sword is coming after the people. It is polished “[to flash like lightning](#)” (10b).

What is the meaning of [flashing like lightning](#)? I think there’s much to see here. First, lightning is fast; so shall the sword be upon Jerusalem. Second, lightning is the weapon of the storm gods like Baal. And yet, throughout the OT, it is *Yahweh* who wields the lightning, taking the weapon away from the gods. I think this is could be in the background based on the notoriously [difficult parenthetical](#) which follows: “[\(Or shall we rejoice? You have despised the rod, my son, with everything of wood\)](#)” (10c). Somehow, this must be related to what was just said. But how?

As I said, this is a difficult one to translate. Here are several attempts:

Judah's Kings and People Interpretation	
NIV	“ ‘Shall we rejoice in the scepter of my son Judah? The sword despises every such stick.
NET	“ ‘Should we rejoice in the scepter of my son? No! The sword despises every tree!
YLT	Desire hath rejoiced the sceptre [rod] of my son, It is despising every tree.
Vul (D-R)	thou removest the sceptre of my son, thou hast cut down every tree.
NKJV	It despises the scepter of My son, As it does all wood.
Tanakh	My son, it scorns the rod and every stick.
Brenton LXX	set at nought, despise every tree.
Hints of a Messianic King and gods/idols Interpretation	
ESV	(Or shall we rejoice? You have despised the rod, my son, with everything of wood.)
MSG	“ ‘My child, you’ve despised the scepter of Judah by worshiping every tree-idol.
Ezek Targ	Because the tribe of the House of Judah and Benjamin rejoiced over the tribes of Israel when they were exiled for having worshipped idols, they in turn went astray after images of wood.

In my mind, they basically break down into **two complementary interpretations**. One is the idea that the rod is the kings of Judah and the wood is the rest of the people.

This fits *the sword* part of earlier in the verse. The sword will not spare either one. **In the other**, we have something that hints of not just the kings of Judah, but the Messiah himself—the rod of Jesse, God’s Son. The people ultimately despised him and turned to the gods of the nations, which is the meaning of “**everything of wood**,” through idolatry. This fits *the lightning* part of **vs. 10**. Yahweh uses a Baal-like lightning sword to judge those who worshiped Baal/Asherah (with their wooden poles/”trees”). The contempt for “every tree” becomes ironic contempt for false gods/idols — the very things Judah trusted instead of the true rod, the Word of God, Christ their King.

Vs. 11 now takes this and shows that while it is **God’s sword**, he is *handing it over to someone else*. “**So the sword is given to be polished, that it may be grasped in the hand. It is sharpened and polished to be given into *the hand of the slayer*.**” Just who that is will be explained in coming rows. But first, the response. “**Cry out and wail, son of man, for it is against my people. It is against all the princes of Israel. They are delivered over to the sword with my people. Strike therefore upon your thigh. For it will not be a testing—what could it do if you despise the rod?**” declares the Lord God” (**12-13**). Striking upon the thigh is a Middle-Eastern gesture of

mourning or calamity, the same as throwing up the hands or throwing ashes on yourself or tearing your clothes.⁵ Why? Because the sword is against everyone.

Row 5 – The Fork in the Road: Babylon’s Divination

We come to **the fifth row**. It begins with one of those clear indicators of a new section. “**As for you, son of man, prophesy**” (14a). But now it continues, “**Clap your hands and let the sword come down twice, yes, three times, the sword for those to be slain. It is the sword for the great slaughter, which surrounds them...**” (14b). The parallels with the previous section are obvious: multiple mention of the sword, total destruction. Here it is called “**the great slaughter surrounding them**” But the prophecy is intensifying. Clapping the hands is a symbol of approval and dance. At what? At the sword song coming down three times upon the slain. It’s a song that Slayer or Megadeth might sing!

Why would God go to such lengths as to speak like this? “**That their hearts may melt, and many stumble**” (15a). Yahweh is **trapping them in their own fear**, and using their own terror to make things worse for them. “**At all their gates I**

⁵ Michael Heiser, “[Naked Bible Podcast Transcript 136: Ezekiel 21-22](#),” Naked Bible (Dec 10, 2016), 6

have given the glittering sword. Ah, it is made like lightning; it is taken up for slaughter. Cut sharply to the right; set yourself to the left, wherever your face is directed” (15b-16). That’s terrifying, but also parallel to what God himself is doing as we return to the wrath of the B column: “*I also will clap my hands, and I will satisfy my fury; I the Lord have spoken*” (17). The Lord becomes the lead singer.

We see at the end of 16 something hinted at back in 11 with the slayer. Now, it says, “Cut sharply to the right; set yourself to the left, wherever your face is directed.” Does this refer to the sword being wielded with no swordsman? No. this hints as what we saw back in vs. 11 with “the slayer.” God hands the sword over to someone else. Who?

Row 6 – Overturn, Overturn, Overturn

We come to the sixth and longest row. “The word of the Lord came to me again” (18). “As for you, son of man, mark two ways for the sword of the king of Babylon to come” (19a). God is giving his sword to the king of Babylon—Nebuchadnezzar. The meaning is very clearly that Nebuchadnezzar is under the authority, not of himself, nor of his own gods, but of the Word of God himself. The

LORD directs the paths of kings. He gives to each of them whatever he chooses.

These “two ways,” it says next, “shall come from the same land” (19b). So “make a signpost; make it at the head of the way to a city” (19b). Basically, pick a spot out on a road and put up a sign. Tell the king of Babylon, “This way to Rabbah of the Ammonites!” “This way to Judah, into Jerusalem the fortified” (20). I think we can understand the Jerusalem part, although just thinking about God commanding Ezekiel to make a sign pointing an invader into the heart of his own capitol city itself truly shows how angry God is. But Ammon? What’s going on there?

Rabbah of the Ammonites is today’s modern Amman, Jordan. It’s first mention in the Bible is Deut 3:11 when it says that they took the giant bed (13x6 ft) of king Og the giant into the city. The Ammonites, who are different from the Amorites (Og was an Amorite), were the cousins of Israel through the lineage of Lot (Gen 19:38). The Ammonites obviously captured Og’s bed as a trophy after Israel defeated him in the wilderness. But why mention the Ammonites here?

It has to do with what happens next. “For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways...” (21a). That sounds like the sign Ezekiel was

commanded to make. Walton explains, “Nebuchadnezzar hesitated at Damascus whether to attack Rabbah of the Ammonites or Jerusalem in Judah.”⁶ Why did he do this? In part, because Ammon was itself in his cross-hairs.

Many Ammonites were **opportunists** in the crisis, many allied themselves with Babylon early on, raiding Judah (2Kg 24:2). Others were **rejoicing** at Judah’s fall (Ezek 25:3-6; Zeph 2:8-10), and took advantage of the chaos to encroach on Judean land and mock the sanctuary’s desecration. What they didn’t think would happen is that Nebuchadnezzar would come *after them*. What we learn next is that they only escaped his sword at this time because of **God’s sovereign providence**, which the king of Babylon saw as something very different.

You must remember that Nebuchadnezzar at this time in his life was as pagan a king as you can get. He did not have his enlightenment about Yahweh until many years later as recalled by Daniel 4. For the king is not just standing at a fork in the road; but rather he goes to that fork *on purpose* “**to use divination**” (21b), something which of course is forbidden to an Israelite (Deut 18:9-14; Lev 19:26; 31). He performs three dark rituals. First, he “**shakes the arrows.**” This is called

⁶ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 450.

belomancy (Gk: *belos*, meaning “arrow, dart, missile” + *manteiaor* meaning “divination”) **rhabdomancy** (Gk: *rhabdos* meaning “rod, wand, staff” + *manteiaor*) and consists of tossing inscribed arrows and drawing one, like a lot, assuming that the selected arrow shows the advice of the gods.⁷

Second, he “**consults the teraphim.**” This one is specifically mentioned in the OT, for example when Josiah removes them as part of his reforms (2Kgs 23:24; cf. Zech 10:2, “**The teraphim utter nonsense.**”). Teraphim are often translated as “**household gods**” (these are the things Rachel kept under her skirt; Gen 31:19) and are “**associated with the protecting and counseling spirits of the ancestors to whom one turns for advice when faced with a difficult decision.**” The root (*rp*) is identical to Rephaim, of which Og himself was one, and so they could be related not merely as dead ancestor ghost-spirits, but the spirits of the demon-giants themselves.⁸ Consulting them is a form of necromancy and this could be a subtle connection to why Rabbah is mentioned. God despises necromancy, for it is a crossing of the realms, and so it becomes ironic that the man who consults these creatures will be directed—at first—not to go to those

⁷ These are in Walton, 451.

⁸ T. J. Lewis, “Teraphim,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 844. 844-50.

who took Og's bed and displayed it to the world, likely still even in Ezekiel's day.

Third, he “looks at the liver.” This is called **hepatoscopy** (Gk: *hepar* meaning “liver” + *skopeō* meaning “to look at” like a microscope or telescope) or **extispicy** (Lat: *exta* meaning “entrails” + *spicium* meaning “to look at”). It is **the examination of the liver of a sacrificial animal**, a widespread form of divination used by witches and oracles and so on. Curiously, we have an 18th cent BC Mari letter written during a military campaign during the reign of King Zimri-Lim against Hammurabi of Kurdā that shows almost the same practice for the same purpose: to wage war.⁹ This was obviously a very common way that kings decided who to attack next. Rather terrifying!

So Nebuchadnezzar is using **ancient pagan practices to determine the will of the gods** as to where he should attack. He wouldn't want to be outside of their will! But like our scientist in *Knowing*, somehow this pagan king is able to take that which is truly oblique and opaque (random arrows,

⁹ “Atamrum with his auxiliary troops together with three kings who are at his service will arrive ... [either via] Saggartum or via Terqa [or via Ma]ri. Concerning the three routes [...] he is going to arrange [an oracular inquiry] and if his gods render their con[sent], it is this (particular) route which shall be taken and he will arrive at my lord (Zimri-Lim).” F. Joannès, “Les campagnes d’Atamrum,” *Archives épistolaires de Mari* I/2, ed. D. Charpin at al. (ARM 26; Paris: Éditions recherche sur les civilisations, 1988), 253–82 (262) (Akkadian text A.487+A.3459, lines 78–85), cited in Walton.

murmurings of teraphim, placement of livers) and find meaning from true riddles and enigmas, thus highlighting even more the rebellion of Israel who does the opposite—calling straightforward prophecies “parables” and “riddles.”

And this then it turned into **the amazing irony** of this part of the story, because even though *he thinks* he is consulting *the gods*, the king of Babylon is actually only able to do any of it because Yahweh—the God of Israel—is handing Jerusalem over to him! Thus it reads, “**Into his right hand comes the divination for Jerusalem, to set battering rams, to open the mouth with murder, to lift up the voice with shouting, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up mounds, to build siege towers**” (22). **Six terrifying statements** that war is upon the Holy City.

But lest someone think that this really just was the gods giving Jerusalem to Babylon, we have the right column asserting itself just now.

²³ But to them it will seem like a false divination. They have sworn solemn oaths, but he brings their guilt to remembrance, that they may be taken. ²⁴ “Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have made your guilt to be remembered, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear—because you have come to

remembrance, you shall be taken in hand. ²⁵ And you, O profane wicked one, prince of Israel, whose day has come, the time of your final punishment, ²⁶ thus says the Lord God: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted. ²⁷ A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make it. This also shall not be, until he comes, the one to whom judgment belongs, and I will give it to him.

(Ezek 21:23-27)

God explains again that it is *he* who is making Jerusalem a ruin (x3). This is not the gods doing it. At best, all they are able to do through the divination is make known *Yahweh's* will to the pagan king. And why?

The people will hear of the divination of Nebuchadnezzar, and think it is a false oracle. Nebuchadnezzar in Damascus *certainly isn't going to come here!* God wouldn't let that happen. Such is the inviability of Israel that we've seen so many times in their thinking. They do not believe anything can happen to them. They are God's chosen people after all!

But no. God is going to *use the pagan consultation against his own people*. The unthinkable is coming. Babylon is going to destroy Jerusalem. All because no matter how many times he brings their guilt to remembrance, they

swear to one another with their own covenant oaths that they are innocent. Their guilt is before them. Their transgressions are uncovered. The prince of Judah is a profane wicked man. Final punishment is upon them. Therefore, they will be taken. The king's turban and crown will be removed. The world will be turned upside down—the exalted will be brought low, the low will be exalted.

Yet, there, at the very end of such devastating news, comes **the smallest glimmer of hope**. For the prophecy says, “**This also shall not be, until he comes, the one to whom judgment belongs, and I will give it to him**” (31). To whom is this prophecy being spoken? At first glance, especially giving the ESV's translation, we might think it refers to **Babylon**. The meaning would be that none of this will finally happen until the king of Babylon whom God has given the right to judge Israel for its sin as the vessel in his hand comes. God has given him judgment and he will carry it out. After all, Nebuchadnezzar even had **the legal right** to do this, given that Zedekiah had foolishly entered into a covenant with him and then broke that covenant right before he was taken into captivity.¹⁰

¹⁰ As John Mayer points out in his interpretation that is messianic for the most part, “**And profaneness is laid to his charge, because he broke his oath to Nebuchadnezzar.**” **John Mayer**,

Nevertheless, the language reminds us of **Genesis 49:10**, “**Until he comes**,” which is a messianic prophecy we’ve seen before. The meaning here would be a kind of **double-fulfillment**, one near and one far. There will be no more king sitting on the throne *until the Messiah*—whose “**right it is**” (KJV, rather than “**to whom judgment belongs**”) comes and **God will give him the throne for eternity**. But it’s cryptic and we still debate it on this side of the cross. Therefore, what would an original hearer have thought?

Row 7 – The Sword Turns Outward: Judgment on Ammon

This leads to **the final Row 7**. “**And you, son of man, prophesy, and say...**” (**Ezek 21:28a**). Suddenly, something even more unexpected happens. Rather than go for the jugular, the knock-out punch, the prophecy turns on ... *the Ammonites!* “**Thus says the Lord God concerning the Ammonites and concerning their reproach; say, A sword, a sword is drawn for the slaughter. It is polished to consume and to flash like lightning—**” (**28b**). We’ve seen nearly that same language already. But now, the sword is flahing over Rabbah.

Commentary Upon All the Prophets; in **Carl L. Beckwith**, Timothy George, and Scott M. Manetsch, eds., *Ezekiel, Daniel: Old Testament*, vol. 12, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 121.

This is a foretaste of the judgment oracles against the nations that will come once the oracles against Jerusalem have been expended. God is not going to let the nations off the hook for their sins any more than he lets Israel off the hook. For even though they have their gods, all are under the Supreme Sovereign Rulership of Yahweh—King of Heaven and Earth. For they are all in covenant with him (**Isa 24:5, 15**).

Thus, he starts telling them that their “**false visions**” are before them, their “**divine lies**” from their oracles kid them, they are actually heaping up wrath on their own heads for consulting wicked beings and spreading lies about right and wrong, good and evil, and the God of this world. “**While they see for you false visions, while they divine lies for you—to place you on the necks of the profane wicked, whose day has come, the time of their final punishment**” (**Ezek 21:29**). The sword is coming for Ammon. “**In the place where you were created, in the land of your origin, I will judge you**” (**30**). What God has the power to judge another nation? Oh beloved, that is a power that belongs only to our God.

It concludes, “**And I will pour out my indignation upon you; I will blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and I will deliver you into the hands of brutish men, skillful to**

destroy. You shall be fuel for the fire. Your blood shall be in the midst of the land. You shall be no more remembered, for I the Lord have spoken” (31-32). The story comes full circle. The fires that erupted in the Negeb will spread, inevitably, to all the families of the earth.

This is the day of final reckoning being predicted. And it is just here that we need to give heed. For while, perhaps six-eight years after he destroyed Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar did take Ammon, Ammon has still been remembered to this day. Yes, that is prophetic hyperbole for the ruin that would come on them. But I think there is more here.

This has all the scent, to me, of Armageddon, the last battle discussed several times from multiple perspectives throughout Revelation. I see this as more foreshadowing for even this battle will be discussed much later in Ezekiel’s book (esp. chs. 38-39). We see here much of the same language used time and again in Revelation for the end battle. “A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make it” sounds similar to “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” (Rev 18:2). In “one hour” its ruin is repeated likewise three times (18:10, 17, 19), echoing the triple ruin of Ammon and its sudden, complete devastation. Like Ammon, “Babylon the great city ... will be found

no more” (18:21). “Her plagues will come in a single day ... she will be burned up with fire” (18:8).

Recall also that language from Ezek 21:14, “It is the sword for the great slaughter, which surrounds them.” This harkens to the great supper of God (Rev 19:17-21) where “the rest were slain by the sword.” Rev 16:14-16 is where we get the word Armageddon, and it refers to the “gathering” for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. Rev 14:19-20 also refers to enormous bloodshed/slaughter in the winepress of God’s wrath. Rev 20:7-9 talks about Gog and Magog “surrounding” the camp of the saints just prior to fire from heaven devouring them. And Rev 6:15-17 refers to the kings of the earth and the great ones hiding themselves “For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

Beyond the Ashes: The Glimmer of the True King

This brings us **full circle**. In *Knowing*, cryptic numbers—once dismissed as random—reveal an inescapable end: fire that spares nothing, except a chosen remnant for a new world. In Ezekiel, the opposite happens: plain, blazing warnings of sword and fire are dismissed as mere parables, riddles too hard to believe. Yet the truth is clear to anyone

with eyes to see: **judgment is coming**, total and final, surrounding us like a siege, melting hearts, leaving no escape. It already happened in the past and senseless dullards did not heed the warning. **It is coming again** in our world's future to all as is hinted at in the destruction of Ammon. Unless... unless we look past the ruin—past Zedekiah's fallen crown, past the smoke and ashes—to the faint glimmer of Messiah: **“until he comes whose right it is, and to him I will give it.”**

That One is the true King, the rightful heir, the Messiah who turns ruin into redemption. Today, don't treat the clear warnings as riddles. Don't become like a trained physician who can't even tell you if man can get pregnant. See them for what they are: **God's urgent call to turn, to hope in the One who outlasts every fire and sword.** Because when the end comes, only those who trust in Him will find life beyond the ashes.

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