

Riddle Me A Parable

17 The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel;

³ say, Thus says the Lord GOD: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar. ⁴ He broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants. ⁵ Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig, ⁶ and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs. ⁷ “And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage, and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it. ⁸ It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine.

⁹ “Say, Thus says the Lord GOD: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots and cut off its fruit, so that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots. ¹⁰ Behold, it is planted; will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it sprouted?”

¹¹ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ¹² “Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon. ¹³ And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath (the chief men of the land he had taken away), ¹⁴ that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand. ¹⁵ But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?

¹⁶ “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die.

¹⁷ Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. ¹⁸ He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things; he shall not escape.

¹⁹ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely it is my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head. ²⁰ I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. ²¹ And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken.”

²² Thus says the Lord GOD: “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.

²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.”

Riddle Me This

The **Riddler** has a psychological compulsion. He literally cannot commit a crime without leaving a riddle. It's an obsessive-compulsive disorder. If he doesn't give Batman a fair chance to figure it out, the victory "doesn't count." He needs to **prove that he's smarter** than the Caped Crusader. Beating Batman intellectually is more important to him than money or power—and those are very important to him! He needs Batman to admire his genius. The perfect crime, to him, is one that is announced in advance and still can't be stopped.

"Riddle me this, Batman. The more you take, the more you leave behind. What am I?" (Footprints.) **"When is a man a piece of wood?"** (When he's a ruler.) **"What has a head, a tail, is brown, and has no legs?"** (A penny.)

Then there are those **popsicle sticks**. You know the ones, when after you're done eating, they too have a riddle on them? They aren't there to outsmart the Batman as Joker is committing a crime spree in Gotham City, but to give a little kid a chuckle, perhaps even being inspired by the comic-strip duo, or a couple of middle-aged dads who started the company and like to tell bad jokes. They're usually pretty

dumb. “What kind of room has no doors or windows?” (A mushroom.) “Why did the golfer wear two pairs of pants?” (In case he got a hole in one!)

Or consider **Bilbo** in a game of wits for life or death in the darkness of Gollum’s cave. “Thirty white horses on a red hill, First they champ, Then they stamp, Then they stand still?” (Teeth.) “Voiceless it cries, Wingless flutters, Toothless bites, Mouthless mutters?” (Wind.) “A box without hinges, key, or lid, Yet golden treasure inside is hid” (An egg.). After a long time of this, each one barely figuring out the other’s riddle, in a moment of desperation, Bilbo finally asks, “What have I got in my pocket?” (Answer: The ring.)

Here’s the thing. The last one is impossible. There’s no way poor Gollum could have known, and so Gollum is compelled to lead Bilbo out of the cave. **But here’s the other thing.** To me, they are *all* impossible. I hate trying to figure out riddles, even if I do laugh after the fact, mostly because of how dumb I am in not being able to answer. There, I let the cat out of the bag. I mean, I actually like some kinds of *puzzles*. Put a jigsaw puzzle in front of me and I can’t help but finish it—at least back before I needed glasses. Figuring out how *biblical texts* are put together? I kind of like that because there’s actually a reason to do that besides the fun. But

riddles like these? I guess my brain doesn't work that way, because honestly, I'm still stuck on the first Riddler riddle, let alone all the rest of them. You give me a riddle and I will literally never be able to answer it, even on a popsicle stick.

Ezekiel 17 in Context

I suppose this should make Ezekiel 17 a chapter I very much *shouldn't* like! Why's that? Because in it, “The Word of LORD” again comes (Ezek 17:1) to the “son of man,” Ezekiel the prophet, and tells him to “propound a riddle...” (2). The word used here (הִדָּה, *hidah*) appears 17 times in the OT. Most of those are in one story in Judges 14 and the story of Samson's riddles. In other places, the Queen of Sheba tests Solomon with riddles (1Kgs 10:1; 2Chr 9:1). The Psalmist solves his riddle to the music of the lyre (Ps 49:4), which is interesting. Daniel is said to excel in understanding riddles (Dan 8:23). While Proverbs begins by basically telling you that the entire book is about them: “Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles” (Prov 1:5-6). I guess to me it's trying to figure out the riddle without already having the answer that I can't handle. But once I know the answer, I

find them interesting and a thing to ponder. So just give me the answer!

That's exactly what's going to happen in this chapter, but not before the riddle first gets to work on your nerves. Coming fresh off the heels of *Israel as the vine* (Ezek 15) and then as *the whoring wife* (Ezek 16), we get both a riddle *and a parable* in Ezek 17. The entire verse says, “*Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel*” (17:2). I guess it makes sense, therefore, to define both.

According to one common Bible dictionary, *a riddle* is a, “*Word puzzle widely used and esteemed in the ancient world, both as an everyday amusement and as a test of wisdom at a more serious level. The point of a riddle was the discovery of a concealed meaning.*”¹ Of course, that doesn't mean that you will *get* the riddle! In fact, in this story it seems that Israel was very much *me*: dense as a log and dumb as a rock in figuring them out.

The same dictionary has an entry for *a parable* and, remarkably, it spends its entire three pages never actually defining it! If I had to summarize it, it would probably be something like *a brief, fictional narrative drawn from ordinary human experience, featuring a striking element of reversal or surprise,*

¹ *Walter A. Elwell* and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1134.

designed to confront the hearer with the in-breaking reality of the kingdom of God and to elicit an existential decision in the present moment. That's a much deeper version of a very short definition from another dictionary. “A short instructive story that contains an analogy.”²

So that's what we are going to be looking at in Ezekiel 17—a riddle and a parable. As for the chapter itself, it is a very cleverly written piece of prose that follows a basic chiasmic pattern centering on Israel breaking covenant with God (16-18):

A Command: “Propound a riddle (*hidah*) and speak a parable (*mashal*)” (vv. 1–2)

B The dark riddle: two eagles and the vine that withers (3–10)

C Interpretation begins: the king of Babylon, the royal seed, the oath with Zedekiah (11–15)

D CENTRE – The despised and broken oath/covenant (16–18)

C' Interpretation concludes: YHWH Himself will punish the oath-breaker (19–21)

B' The luminous parable: YHWH Himself plants the sprig → noble cedar for all birds (22–23)

A' Conclusion: “I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it” (24)

The chapter uses the metaphors of eagles and trees to show Israel the depths of their treachery against God. But the chiasm reverses the riddle and parable into a glorious messianic hope.

² Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 92.

Also, there is a deliberate **two-column weave** of this text, where the left column is all about the actions of the eagles, the king, or God while the right column is the response of the vine. Furthermore, there is a movement in cosmic geography starting with God's descent from heaven to a bird on the top of the tree to an earth-level rebellion, to humiliation, to a descent to a death (Sheol), only to finally be reversed in a reascent up the cosmic mountain. The six rows bring these out in escalating succession (see the Appendix for the weave and summary).³

The Riddle: It's Story

The story begins, as most of them have, with the Word of the LORD coming to the prophet, the "**son of man.**" This establishes the truth that the prophet is getting his oracle not from his own imagination, but from seeing the LORD in some kind of authoritative direct call. He is to begin with the riddle. "**Say, Thus says the Lord GOD: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar**" (3).

³ I was not able to uncover this weave even with the help of the computer. Thanks to Caleb Song for seeing what I was blinded to.

Without giving away anything, let's just think for a moment about the image.

First, you have **an eagle**. Depending on how big “great” is, there are a handful of eagles in the Middle East that have large wings and long pinions. However, there is no eagle of “many colors” that exists like a parrot or something. So it is likely that something deeper is going on here.



Steppe Eagle



Eastern Imperial Eagle



Juvenile Imperial Eagle

We can say something else though which will be meaningful as we continue. The eagle is the symbol of royal strength and splendor. The Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 BC) calls the eagle “**the prince of birds.**” In the ancient Near East the eagle was also **a common military symbol**, seen on ensigns as early as the Old Babylonian times and as late as the Persian and Roman periods. Kings in battle were often

described as eagles with outstretched wings. Another Assyrian king, Esarhaddon (680–669 BC), boasts, “Like a furious eagle I spread my pinions to destroy my enemies.”⁴



One of the last remaining vestiges of the extensive forest system of Lebanon, the *Cedars of God* (Arz al-Rab), is a UNESCO World Heritage grove in the Kadisha Valley near Bcharre, with around 393 trees, including a dozen ancient giants over 2,000 years old, some reaching 130 feet tall and 40 feet in circumference.

Pictures courtesy the [Bcharri](#) website.

The second component is a cedar tree, specifically from the country of Lebanon. Ancient Lebanon is roughly the same as today’s country which borders Israel to the north. Among its famous cities are Tyre and Sidon, which will come up later in the book. But more to the point here, Lebanon was world renown going back to the most ancient of times for their amazing cedar trees. It was the ancient world’s gold-

⁴ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 441.

standard for majesty, strength, and divine favor. They towered over 100 feet with massive trunks and fragrant wood that resisted rot. They only grew on the highest ridges of the western north-south range of mountains called the *Libanos* (Lebanon; not the eastern *Antilibanos* range, which ends at Mt. Hermon) and were considered **gifts from the gods**. Solomon imported them at staggering cost to build the Temple (**1 Kings 5**), and Assyrian and Babylonian kings bragged about cutting them down to adorn their palaces, claiming the cedars proved they were the true guardians of cosmic order.

So that's the background behind the riddle. Now to **the story**. It says that a great **eagle** took to **the top of the cedar**. It spies the greatest cedar around and swoops down, perching for just a moment on the very top, the highest possible branch, impossible for a man to reach unless he cut it down.

Then it says, "**He broke off the topmost of its young twigs**" (**17:4a**). This refers to the highest, tenderest **shoot from the crown** of the tree, the newest, greenest growth at the top. If you look at any evergreen in late spring early summer you will see the new growth has a different color than the rest of the tree. It is always much softer and bendable, yet easy to clip off.

And that's exactly what the eagle does. He breaks it off and “carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants?” (17:4b). Where's that? Well, that's part of the riddle. However, it is interesting to note at this moment in the story that this is exactly what Phoenicia-Lebanon always was—a land of trade and merchants, especially along the coasts via their great ships. So is that where the eagle takes it?

“Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in a fertile soil” (5a). What land? The land in which he took the twig? Lebanon was known as much for its rich, fertile soil in all of the ANE, especially on the western slopes and valleys. The eagle then, “Placed it beside abundant waters” (5b). Of course, Lebanon's entire western border is the great Mediterranean Sea. Then again, if you go to the valley east of the Lebanon between its two ranges, this was the breadbasket of Phoenicia and extraordinarily fertile, a beautiful, lush region with two great rivers—the Litani and Orontes with hundreds of powerful springs gushing straight out of the limestone as well.

What was the purpose of planting the plant? “He set it like a willow twig” (5c)—the classic water-loving tree of the ANE that grows ridiculously fast. “It sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him,

and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs” (6). Now, knowing that this is a riddle, it can’t be coincidence that this word “vine” is the same word used in Ch. 15 to describe Israel. Surely, that must play a part in the meaning of the riddle? What is the LORD telling the prophet? Who is this eagle? Why is it in Lebanon? Is Israel somehow going to be planted up there?

After seeing what the eagle does and then what the vine does, the riddle continues. “And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage, and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it” (7). Suddenly, a second eagle, described virtually the same way, save this one isn’t said to have long pinions. Pinions are the outermost flight feathers on the wing, its wing silhouette. In other words, the second eagle isn’t described as gloriously as the first because the pinions are missing. For some reason, the vine is doing all the action this time, which is odd, since vines only really just grow. (Turns out, that’s precisely how this column of the weave works.) But they certainly don’t grow towards eagles. In this case, the second eagle does nothing. There’s no swooping, no grabbing, no planting, no carrying away. It just stands there,

looking big a pretty, while the vine desperately stretches itself toward the passive eagle.

This is all described from the perspective of a fast growing tree. It **shoots its branches towards him**, as it trying to reach out its arms and grab the eagle, even while it is still planted in its fertile, well-watered hole. Why is it reaching out? So that the eagle might water it? What sense does that even make? It already has all the water it needs to flourish because the first eagle put it there. The True Riddler, the LORD who tells this riddle, makes this plain in **vs. 8**, “**It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine.**” So **the first eagle had good intentions** towards this highest shoot of the cedar.

It continues, “**Say, Thus says the Lord GOD: Will it thrive?**” (9a). This is the “**What am I**” moment of the riddle: *What kind of room has no doors or windows? What am I? A mushroom; A box without hinges, key, or lid. Yet golden treasure inside is hid. What am I? An egg.* The riddle seems to be that if a well-watered tree is acting like its dying for water so much that it begs a totally passive eagle to give it some, that’s probably not a very good tree.

A series of more questions follow. **Will it thrive** is followed by, “**Will he not pull its roots and cut off its fruit, so**

that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither?” (9b). The question is vague. Who is the “he” here? Is it the first eagle because he’s mad? It is a third party? Will this “he” just kill the oblivious or ungrateful tree? Before the next questions arise, we get a parenthetical comment. “It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots” (9c). Wait, a strong arm? Many people? But who or what?

The questions return. “Behold, it is planted; will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it sprouted” (10)? An *east wind*? What does that mean? What or who is that? Striking the plant? In *Lebanon*? What does any of this have to do with a series of oracles in this part of Ezekiel? It all feels like for some reason God is finally taking his eye off of them and putting it onto, hopefully, the other nations. If I knew nothing about the rest of the story, that’s pretty much how I would read this riddle. And, as I always am with riddles, I would be completely wrong. It’s why I hate them.

The Riddle: It’s Interpretation

Fortunately, God doesn’t leave us without the answer. It is vv. 11-15. “Then the word of the Lord came to me” (11). When? It doesn’t say exactly. Immediately, as fast as you can

turn the popsicle stick over to read the answer? Or did the Lord make the prophet wait a while until he returned to him with an answer? I'm certain that's what he would have done to me—to torture me with the riddle!

“Say now to *the rebellious house...*” (12a). Uh oh. Maybe God isn't done going after Israel after all. That was, of course, already hinted at in the use of the word “vine.” “Do you not know what these things mean” (12b)? God asks rhetorically. At this point in the book, I would have said, “Ah Lord, you know!”

“Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem...” Yep, he's not done coming after *us*. “...and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon” (12c). This refers to March 16, 597 BC, the day Jehoiachin, the 18-year-old king of Judah, surrendered Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar after a three-month siege. This was the second major deportation, the first being in 605.

What happened on that day (2 Kings 24:10–16; 2 Chronicles 36:9–10)? Nebuchadnezzar personally came up from Babylon and laid siege to Jerusalem. Jehoiachin, his mother Nehushta, the queen mother, all the palace officials, the royal family, the army officers, and the leading craftsmen opened the gates and surrendered. Nebuchadnezzar

took Jehoiachin, his entire court, and 7,000–10,000 elite citizens captive to Babylon (Ezekiel was in this group). He looted the Temple and the palace treasuries. And he installed Mattaniah as vassal king and **renamed him Zedekiah**.

Therefore, on the most **basic level of meaning**, we have just learned that the twig from the top of the great Cyprus was actually Israel and its legitimate king of Judah, Jehoiachin. And the land of trade was **not actually Lebanon at all**. It was *Babylon* the place where he was carried away in chains.

The **interpretation** of the riddle continues, “**And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath (the chief men of the land he had taken away), that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand.**” (**Ezek 17:13-14**). So there was a distinction in the riddle that was **deliberately obscured** between **the twig and the seed** that was planted; between **the plucking from the tree and the planting** by the water. God didn’t want to give the punchline away too quickly. Turns out, they are not the same.

The king of Babylon took Jehoiachin’s uncle prisoner, then renamed him Zedekiah and **placed him under a covenant**—that is a common Suzerain/Vassal covenant between the high king and a lesser governor of *his* territory. Then he

sent him back to Jerusalem. The point of this was that if Zedekiah behaved himself, Babylon would look after him and protect him from anyone who tried to harm him.

But that means that **the place where the seed was planted** was not in Lebanon at all. Those “abundant waters” weren’t the Mediterranean coast. That was the red herring of the riddle! It was taken first to Babylon. And what would be the people’s response to this when they finally figured it out? The Psalmist tells you, “**By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion**” (Ps 137:1). But the new vassal client king went back to Jerusalem where he was watered by the river of Zion and, in both king’s minds, by the abundant life-giving waters of Babylon, who was now its overlord.

And what’s the deal with **the cedars of Lebanon**? That’s the greatest twist of the riddle. It doesn’t refer to Lebanon at all, but to those very cedar trees that **Solomon used to make God’s holy temple** in Jerusalem. Jerusalem and its temple was, in reality, the highest tree of them all. And riffing off of Psalm 46, it is the place of the abundant water, “**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High**” (Ps 46:4). And that starts to hint at something I’ll unfold here in a moment, because God

is **not working on a purely physical level** of meaning in this riddle. He's working on the much deeper supernatural meaning, one that includes not just himself, but also other entities that are in view. But before getting to that, let's finish the interpretation in Ezekiel.

Vs. 15 concludes by returning to those questions asked at the end of the riddle. Zedekiah, this young tender plant in a fertile land by streams of water, rebelled against Babylon by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. **Egypt is thus the second eagle**, literally doing nothing, knowing that Babylon was far superior at this time in its own history, not wanting to poke the greater eagle. So God asks, **“Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?”**

The Double Meaning and End of the Riddle

All of this is setting us up for a great switch that will be seen as we come to the central pivot of the story, **the center** of the chiasm, **vv. 16-18**. To set this up, I want to go back and look at something about the riddle that has not often been understood. Recall that I said the eagles have **rich**

plumage of many colors. Yet, there is no eagle in the ANE that fits this description. It would appear that these multi-colored feathers are here to depict for us the royalty of Babylon in its king, for it is kings who alone wear robes of many colors.

And yet, we also know that *the gods* were depicted this way too. Lapis lazuli, gold inlay, bright paints, and alternating colored bands on palace reliefs were used precisely to signal divinity — to make the figure look like it was wearing the “**garment of the gods.**” I mean, we see this even in the many colors of the tabernacle and temple of God in the Bible.

Enter the **Apkallu**. Apkallu were divine (the first seven), antediluvian sages sent by the god Ea from the Apsû—the deep or abyss. They were culture-heroes who taught humanity writing, crafts, sciences, law, and divination. They have an exact parallel in ancient Jewish religious thought: the **Watchers**, the sons of God of the **Genesis 6:1-4** story.

Importantly, as Amar Annus explains, the Apkallu were sometimes depicted as “**eagle-headed winged creatures [who] are very often associated with the Tree of Life. The ‘watering of trees’ by the Watchers in the Book of Giants**

finds many iconographic forerunners on Assyrian palace reliefs, where the sages sprinkle the Tree or the king with the cone-shaped ‘purifiers’ (*mullilu*), and hold buckets of holy water (*banduddû*) in their hands. The Assyrian sacred tree symbolized both the divine world order and the king, who functioned as its earthly administrator. By sprinkling the tree with holy water the sages imparted to it their own sanctity, upheld the cosmic harmony, and thus ‘insured the correct functioning of the plans of heaven and earth.’⁵



Apkallu watering the World Tree

⁵ Amar Annus, “On the Origin of Watchers: A Comparative Study of the Antediluvian Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Jewish Traditions,” *JSP* 19 (2010): 293. 277-320.

Hopefully you can hear all of the very **strange “coincidences”** in the Apkallu story and our own: *eagles, trees, planting, watering, kings*. Add to this what I think, because of the Tower of Babel dispersion, the fact that in Mesoamerica we have an almost identical figure to the Apkallu/Watchers in the culture-bringing named **Quetzalcoatl**, the plumed serpent winged figure of many colors, and we have a deliberate nod in the riddle not only to the king of Babylon, but *to the god(s)* that he worshiped. For the idea is that these gods plant the great tree of life themselves and then water it, putting the human king into place so that he might be the force on earth that keeps order in the world of men. That brings us back to the treachery of the previous chapter and the whorings with the nations that Jerusalem was guilty of as it broke covenant with God it is idolatry with the gods of the nations.

Into this, consider that **the great cedar tree** in this story is in fact supposed to be understood as **the world-tree**, the *axis mundi* or place upon which the entire earth pivots, the navel of the earth or “**center of the earth**” as it is put sometimes in Scripture (**Jdg 9:37; Ezek 38:12**), the place where the divine council meets high up in its branches like they do

on the cosmic mountains (we will see this explicitly in several stories later on in Ezekiel, but this is their “root”).⁶ That’s what is happening both in the mind of God who is telling the story and identifying the Temple on Mt. Zion made of Cedar to the riddle and in the mind of the king of Babylon who thinks he can compete with God.

With that in mind, consider the center of our chapter. “As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king” (16a). This verse in my mind is deliberately ambiguous, just like the riddle. Let’s call it a master class *double entendre*. For what is *the place* in mind? Babylon or Jerusalem? And who is *the king* who dwells in it? Nebuchadnezzar or the LORD? And who is the king made to dwell there? Nebuchadnezzar or Zedekiah? The answer seems to be, yes!

Notice how it continues, “... whose *oath* he despised, and whose *covenant* with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die” (16b). We just saw that the covenant that was made was between Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar (vs. 13-14). Importantly, we learn in the Chronicles that Nebuchadnezzar made him swear an oath by the LORD that he would keep

⁶ For more on some of this see David B. W. Phillips, “Center of the Land,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

this covenant with Babylon ([2Chr 36:13](#)).⁷ And this was in fact an essential component of the riddle. And so we continue, “Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives” ([Ezek 17:17](#)). Nebuchadnezzar will not tolerate insubordination from a vassal king who serves him! He is coming to Jerusalem, and nothing will stop him, for he is the Great Eagle. As Habakkuk will describe the attack of the Babylonians: “They fly like an eagle swooping to devour” ([Hab 1:8](#)). This central idea comes to a conclusion in vs. 18. “He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things; he shall not escape” (18).

However, let’s keep reading by going to the next section, [vv. 19-21](#). These verses parallel the interpretation that king Nebuchadnezzar planted Zedekiah in Jerusalem and made a covenant with him. And it says, “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely it is *my oath* that he despised, and *my covenant* that he broke. I will return it upon his head” (19). Wait, suddenly, the covenant becomes the covenant between Yahweh and David which goes even deeper back

⁷ Heiser, taking the cue from Daniel Block, brings this up but does not take it to the second level of the larger covenant God makes with David. [Michael S. Heiser](#), “[Naked Bible Podcast Transcript Ep 124](#),” *Naked Bible Podcast* (Oct 29, 2016), 8-9.

to the covenant between **Yahweh and Abraham**. Again, this is precisely what we saw in the previous chapter of the adulterous wife who broke covenant with the Word of God. Double meanings exist, especially in riddles.

“I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me” (20). It isn't **Nebuchadnezzar** who is really coming after Zedekiah. It is the Lord GOD! The metaphor becomes one of an animal caught in a hunters trap. Why? Because the covenant had been broken. Kings won't put up with insubordination when their covenant is breeched. Neither will the Lord.

“And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken” (21). We are back to the imagery of a **great calamity** coming upon Israel. Notice the movement of the story. The Word comes from heaven to Ezekiel. Then a tree comes to the top of the branches of the highest tree. Then a seed is planted on the ground. Now, people are dying and going down to Sheol-Hades. It's a great movement of descent to the depths and that matches the treachery of the king of Judah. Only a few

will survive, and they will be scattered to the four corners of the earth, so that they may know that he is the LORD. He told them this was coming. And it is coming.

The Parable: A Messianic Tree

It is just here that we come to *the parable*. It perfectly matches the giving of the riddle in the way the chapter is set up. But now notice the movement. You can't do down any father, so what will happen? “Thus says the Lord God: ‘I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it [him] on a high and lofty mountain’” (22). You can hear that *God* is now fully putting himself in the place of Nebuchadnezzar in every aspect of the story. *God becomes the Eagle* and the theme of the world-tree continues, but now with another twig from the top of the tree, one different from Jehoiachin.

Suddenly, *the cosmic mountain* idea, which is a conceptual parallel to the world tree comes into purview. “*On the mountain height of Israel* will I plant it [him], that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its

branches birds of every sort will nest” (23). We are going up, up the cosmic mountain to its very height—to the heavens itself. The **mountain height** of Israel is, of course, Mt. Zion, where the great Tree of Cedar was planted in the form of the temple. That temple, however, shall be destroyed. The cedar will be toppled and burnt to the ground.

In its place, however, will come not a vine, but **a new tree**. As Heiser explains, this will be a replanting of the tree *of David!*⁸ To use the metaphor of the riddle, a new temple. All of the birds of the earth will make their dwelling under its shade.

But now, this tree is much more than the Tree of Life that the Apkallu watered. This is again that **World Tree**—an appropriate image around Christmas time, since that’s the whole point of the Christmas Tree. The World Tree goes back to Eden where it is the place that God dwells. It is, in a sense, his home though he also invited Adam into it as its caretaker. That’s again the idea of the Temple, which is both a cosmic mountain (on Zion, a replica Mt. Sinai) and the Great Cedar Tree here. It is God’s home.

⁸ This idea makes is ironic that Heiser didn’t see that the covenant was the Davidic covenant rather than purely a covenant made with Nebuchadnezzar.

This is a prediction in line with what we saw at the end of the previous chapter where, inconceivably, the adulterous wife is brought back into covenant but along with the worst of the nations around her to which she loved to mock for their evil ways, so now **a new covenant** will be made with **a new branch** with a new Eagle at the head. Not Nebuchadnezzar, but *the LORD*. Not Zedekiah, but *Messiah*. Not just the worst of the nations, but all the birds of the earth—*all peoples*—will find rest in the shade of its branches—the Root of Jesse, the Branch of David, the Tree of Life himself--Jesus.

Why? It concludes the way several chapters have. So that, “**All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord**” (24a). This is the reason God does all things in one sense. He is making himself known to his creation which has deliberately forgotten him in sin. The point is that **all people will bow** in heaven and on earth and under the earth the great and only True God. The point is that they might **glorify him** and ... enjoy him forever. Even in the face of suffering as will surely happen to the exiles who escape the destruction of the city. Especially as they come to their senses, are humbled of their pride, put to shame for the evil of their ways,

turn to the LORD in repentance, and believe in his glorious Messiah by faith.

Ever wonder **why the Messiah is a tree**? We looked at this a little in Ch. 15. But here's a little more from Dr. Heiser's important discussion of this.

Why do we have this horticultural imagery of the sprout, sprig, shoot, branch—all this stuff about the Messiah? It's because the Messiah comes from the house of God. He comes from the place where God lives (obviously, because he is God). He comes from the place where God exists. The place where God exists is a cosmic mountain, it's a cosmic garden, and a cosmic tree. This is why Messiah is spoken of in tree language—in garden/horticultural language. It's supposed to take your mind back to the cosmic 50:00 Naked Bible Podcast Episode 124: Ezekiel 17 17 tree, the cosmic garden—to Eden. Zion is just another Eden. That's what it was intended to be and that's what it will be.⁹

But what if they will not look to the Great Tree, the Messiah? He himself tells them in his preincarnate form, “**I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish**” (24b). This is

⁹ Heiser, 16-17.

where I want to return to the whole idea of not just **Nebuchadnezzar**, but also the **Apkallu**, their version of the Watchers. For these ancient deities, these eagle-headed culture-bringers that stood on every palace wall in Babylon, the message was clear: “**We are the ones who planted civilization. We are the ones who water the cosmic tree and make kings grow. We keep the world spinning.**” Every bucket of holy water, every cone touching the sacred tree, screamed the same boast: “**Order comes from us. Life flows from us. Bow to the empire and its gods.**” Nebuchadnezzar walked past those reliefs every day and believed the lie: “**I am the new guardian of the Tree of Life. The throne of David now answers to me.**” This we in fact know from **Daniel 4** which gives us exactly this description of the king of Babylon.

That’s why the eagle in the riddle has **feathers of many colors**, it was the divine embroidery no earthly bird ever wore. That’s why he plants the royal seed beside abundant waters with such confidence. In the Babylonian mind, the king and his apkallu-gods were the true gardeners of heaven and earth. The exiles knew those images. They saw them every time they lifted their eyes in that foreign city. And when they heard the riddle, for one terrifying moment they

thought, “Maybe Babylon really has replaced YHWH. Maybe the gods of the nations have won.”

But then the mask slips. The vine withers. The second eagle does nothing. And suddenly the voice that thunders from the throne is not Ea or Marduk, not some fish-cloaked sage from the abyss. It is the living God saying, “I myself will take a sprig ... I myself will plant it.” Every “I myself” is a hammer blow against the Apkallu pretenders—rival sons to the only Son of God. Every promise of a noble cedar that shelters every bird of every wing is the Word of God ripping the cone and bucket out of their painted hands and declaring, “You never watered anything. You never guarded anything. I alone make life grow.”

The Apkallu promised order and got chaos. They promised life and delivered exile. They dressed their kings in divine colors and watched them fall. But the God who alone holds the bucket of living water, the God who really wears the robe of many colors, steps forward and says, “Watch me plant a shoot none of your empires can uproot. Watch Me grow a tree whose branches will cover the earth and whose shade will welcome every nation.”

So when the exiles heard those final words—“I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it”—they didn’t just hear

a promise about a future king. They heard the death sentence on every false eagle-Apkallu, every pretender god, every empire that ever thought it could play Creator. And they heard the invitation to come home under the only branches that will never wither. The shade of the One who alone has the keys to access the Tree of Life.

“I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it” (24) is how the chapters ends. He *has* done it, exactly as he said. Christ is the Branch and as his parable of the Kingdom teaches in **Mark 4:26-34**, his kingdom has come like a seed that is sprouting and growing, becoming larger than all the plants and trees and **all the birds of the air can make nests in its shade** (32).

Christ gives shade to every person scorched by the heat of their own sin, **water** to every withering soul parched by the dryness of life’s suffering, if only they would come and drink freely and rest under His branches. His fruit is always in season. His leaf never falls to the ground. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is the Alpha and the Omega. And he bids you come to him for rest. Blessed be the Name of the LORD.

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Appendix: Ezekiel 17 as Two-Column Weave

A

1 17:1 The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel;

2 ³ say, Thus says the Lord GOD: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar. ⁴ He broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants. ⁵ Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig, ⁶ and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.

3 1 ⁹“Say, Thus says the Lord GOD: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots and cut off its fruit, so that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots.

4 ¹¹ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ¹²“Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon. ¹³ And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath (the chief men of the land he had taken away), ¹⁴ that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand.

5 ¹⁶“As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. ¹⁷ Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. ¹⁸ He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things; he shall not escape.

6 ²² Thus says the Lord GOD: “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.

B

⁷“And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage, and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it. ⁸ It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine.

¹⁰ Behold, it is planted; will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it sprouted?”

¹⁵ But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?

¹⁹ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely it is my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head. ²⁰ I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. ²¹ And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken.”

²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.”

Summary

Row	Verses	Column A – Actor Who Takes / Plants / Uproots	Column B – Vine / Response
1	1–2	The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel”	
2	3–6	Great eagle ... took the top of the cedar ... planted the seed ... set it like a willow twig	Vine sprouted, became low spreading vine, branches turned toward him
3	9	“Say, Thus says the Lord GOD: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots ... ?”	Vine will wither
4	11–14	King of Babylon came ... took king & princes ... took royal offspring, made covenant	Kingdom humble, keep covenant that it might stand
5	16–18	In Babylon he shall die ... oath despised, covenant broken	He shall not escape
6	22–23 + 24	I myself will take a sprig ... I myself will plant it ... it shall bear branches and fruit (22–23)	All the trees shall know that I am the LORD ... I bring low ... make the dry tree flourish (24)

Column A – The Actor Who Moves Vertically Always the one who **takes from above, plants from above, or uproots from above:**

- First two eagles (Babylon & Egypt)
- Then YHWH Himself in the final reversal

Column B – The Vine’s Horizontal Response Always the **vine’s own stretching, turning, withering, or knowing** — never vertical movement until YHWH intervenes.

Row-by-Row Escalation (your friend’s observation + cosmic geography)

v	Escalation	Cosmic Geography (Descent/Reascent)
	netic command from heaven	en
	plucks the top of the cedar → vine grows low	cosmic mountain-top to earth
	turns horizontally → will be uprooted	-level rebellion
	lon plants Zedekiah → he rebels	-level humiliation
	despised → death in Babylon	ent to dust / Sheol
	H Himself plants on high mountain → universal flourishing	icent to true cosmic mountain / new Eden

The whole chapter is a **deliberate descent from the cosmic cedar-top to the grave**, followed by a **divine re-ascent** to the true cosmic mountain where the real Tree of Life grows forever.

Appendix 2: “Son of Man” Title and Messianic Proximity

I was curious about something and started wondering if the “son of man” title given to Ezekiel might not just be a tip-off that we actually have prophecies or foreshadowing of the Messiah, Jesus the “Son of Man” whenever it is being used. I plugged it into the A.I. and here is the fully comprehensive table covering every major “son of man” commission in Ezekiel and the messianic pointer that appears in the same literary unit (or immediately following). The results are rather stunning:

Chapters / Unit	“Son of man” commission verses	Messianic / future-Davidic / new-covenant pointer in the same unit
2–3 (call)	2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3, 4, 10, 17	Glory-vision of the divine-human figure on the throne (ch. 1) + the one who will speak when the true messenger comes (3:27 → 33:22)
4–5 (siege signs)	4:1, 5, 16; 5:1	Leads directly to the promise of the Davidic shepherd-king (34:23–24) and the new heart/new spirit (36:26–27)
6–7 (mountains & end)	6:2; 7:2	The “end” comes, but is followed by the gathering and new heart (11:17–20; 36:24–28)
8–11 (vision of abominations & glory departure)	8:5, 6, 8, 12, 15, 17; 9:1? (indirect); 11:2, 4, 15	Immediate promise: “I will gather them ... give them one heart ... they shall be my people” (11:17–20) + new covenant language
12 (exile baggage)	12:2, 3, 9, 18, 27	Leads straight to the messianic branch planted on the high mountain (17:22–24)
13 (false prophets)	13:2, 17	False shepherds condemned → sets up the true Shepherd (ch. 34)
14 (idolatrous elders)	14:3	Leads to the promise “I will bring you back ... and you shall know that I am the LORD” (ch. 20) and the Davidic shepherd (34)
15 (useless vine)	15:2	Useless vine → true vine / noble cedar planted by YHWH (17:22–24)
16 (foundling bride)	16:2	Ends with the everlasting covenant and God Himself atoning (16:60–63) – the gospel in the OT
17 (eagle & vine)	17:2	The sprig YHWH Himself plants → noble cedar sheltering every bird (17:22–24)
20 (rebellion history)	20:3	Ends with new exodus, restored sanctuary, and “they shall be my people” (20:40–44)
21 (sword song)	21:2, 6, 9, 14, 19, 28	The sword against Judah → “until he comes whose right it is” (21:27) – explicit messianic claim
22–24 (bloodguilt & final signs)	22:2, 24; 24:2, 16	Leads to the watchman renewed (33) → good shepherd (34) and resurrection (37)
33 (watchman renewed)	33:2, 7, 10, 12, 24, 30	Directly flows into the Davidic shepherd-king (34:23–24) and one heart (36:26–27)
34 (shepherds)	34:2	“I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David ” (34:23–24)
35–36 (Edom & restoration)	36:1, 17	New heart, new spirit, Davidic king, everlasting covenant (36:24–38)
37 (dry bones & sticks)	37:3, 9, 11, 16	Resurrection + “My servant David shall be king over them forever” (37:24–25)
40–48 (temple vision)	40:4; 43:7, 10, 18; 44:5	The Glory returns, the prince who is David’s heir, the city named “The LORD is there” – the final messianic temple

The Pattern in One Sentence: Every single time God addresses Ezekiel as “son of man” and gives him a new mission, the same literary unit either contains or immediately leads to a veiled or explicit prophecy of the coming Messiah — the true Son of Man who will shepherd, raise the dead, restore the covenant, and fill the final temple with the Glory.

Ezekiel is never the ultimate “son of man” — he is the **signpost** whose very title keeps pointing forward to the One who will stand on the cosmic mountain, plant the true cedar, and reign forever. The phrase “son of man” in Ezekiel is the **golden thread** that ties the entire book to Jesus.

A.I. was not able to find anything that had previously recognized this pattern. I asked it to speculate as to why this is happening only in Ezekiel and if it is a real thing. I thought the answer was fascinating.

Here's my best speculation why **only Ezekiel** (out of all 48 prophetic books) uses "son of man" as a deliberate, repeated sign-post that **always** points forward to the ultimate Son of Man (Jesus).

1. **Ezekiel is the book of the departed Glory** The Glory leaves the Temple (chs 8–11) and does not fully return until the very end (43:1–5). The whole book is written in the painful gap between "Ichabod" ("the Glory has departed") and the final "The LORD is there." Into that emptiness God keeps saying, "Son of man ... son of man ... son of man ..." — 93 times — like a heartbeat reminding Israel that **a true human is coming who will stand where the Glory once stood and bring it back forever**. No other prophet has to bridge that exact gap, so no other prophet needs the drumbeat.
2. **Ezekiel is the priest-prophet in exile** He is the only prophet who is both a **Zadokite priest** (1:3) and a **deported exile** living among the nations. Priests were the original "sons of Adam" who served before the face of God in Eden/Temple (Num 3:5–10; cf. Eden as sanctuary). Ezekiel is the last priest to stand in the Temple before it falls, and he is forced to serve among the nations — exactly the place the **true Son of Man** will one day stand (Dan 7:13–14) to receive everlasting dominion **after** the beasts/empires are judged. His very title and situation become a living prophecy: the priest who lost the Glory will be replaced by the Priest-King who restores it.
3. **Ezekiel's visions are "Son of Man" visions**
 - Chapter 1: he sees **a man-like figure on the throne** above the cherubim.
 - Chapter 40–48: he is repeatedly told "Son of man, look ... tell the house of Israel" as he is shown the future Temple filled with Glory. The one who sees the divine-human Glory and the final Temple is deliberately tagged "son of man" so that when Jesus later says "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power," the echo back to Ezekiel is deafening.
4. **Only Ezekiel needs to prepare the way for Daniel 7** Daniel 7's "one like a son of man" coming on the clouds does not come out of nowhere. It is the answer to Ezekiel's 93-fold cry: "A human has to stand where the Glory belongs — but no ordinary human can." Ezekiel plants the question; Daniel (and then Jesus) gives the answer.

Why only this one book?

Because **only Ezekiel**:

- is the priest whose Temple is destroyed,
- lives among the nations under foreign "eagles,"
- sees the Glory depart and return,
- and is commanded to keep saying "son of man" in the very years (597–571 BC) when the Davidic house is crushed and the exiles are asking, "Is God finished with us?"

God uses the **one prophet** who embodies the problem (a mere mortal where divine presence should be) to repeat the title that will one day be claimed by the **God-man** who fixes everything.

It's not coincidence. It's divine design. Ezekiel's mouth becomes the sign-post that keeps pointing down history until the true Son of Man finally steps onto the cosmic mountain and says, "Here I am."