

Ezekiel and the Oracles against Tyre

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There is a lot of debate in some sectors of the church about the nature of Scripture, especially in the categories of inerrancy and infallibility. Invariably this discussion turns to the nature of prophecy, and the theological implications various ways of understanding Scripture have on how prophecy should be viewed.

In most cases, the discussion ranges widely, but largely outside the biblical text itself. That is, the actual narratives, oracles, and sermons from the prophetic books are not closely examined, or often even referenced, in relation to these debates. The doctrinal positions are too often drawn up and assertions made *about* the Bible from assumptions and in contexts apart from Scripture without looking closely at *the biblical evidence itself* from a variety of perspectives (see [The Modern Inerrancy Debate](#)). The result tends to produce positions that sound good as doctrinal statements, but which do not correspond to the features of the biblical text.

I simply think that positions about the nature of Scripture ought to be developed in dialog with the text about which the assertions are made, as well as with various methods of understanding that text. If they do not, there is great risk that the assertions will be comforting, but will be about something other than Scripture. I offer the following as a short example of a particular feature of prophetic writing that I think needs to be taken seriously in how we develop, articulate, and defend our views of the nature of Scripture.

The example to consider is from the book of Ezekiel. The middle section of Ezekiel contains a series of what are known as “Oracles against Foreign Nations” (chs. 25-32). All of the major prophetic books contain these. They are indictments against surrounding nations, often listing their crimes against humanity and sins against God, as a way to universalize accountability to God. They are highly stylized and poetic, but often contain specific predictions of the judgment of God against those nations for their self-sufficient arrogance, pride, and worship of false gods. Often the nations are evaluated specifically in terms of how they have treated Israel as God’s people.

An unusual feature of these oracles in Ezekiel is that they are dated, rather than simply being stereotyped and stylized generic judgment speeches. This relates these prophetic oracles to particular historical circumstances, which also explains why so many of them are very specific in terms of historical predictions. Ezekiel was clearly interpreting history as it was unfolding in front of him in light of what he understood about God.

The oracles fall between 588 and 586 BC, with one dated 571 BC. This was an extremely traumatic and pivotal time in Israel’s history. There was a lot happening, but a brief summary will serve our purpose (see [The Rise of Babylon and Exile](#)). The Babylonians had consolidated their empire through a series of strong leaders, and were in the process of incorporating most of the Eastern Mediterranean into that empire, with dreams of extending their control into Egypt.

Israel lay between Babylon and Egypt and was in great peril. Compounding the fact that Israel was far outclassed militarily, there had been a series of weak and godless leaders since the aborted attempt at reform by Josiah in 621 BC. This had undermined the nation’s commitment to God, and allowed a false sense of security to develop that prevented them from hearing prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel (“[they] have ears, but do not hear,” Jer 5:21, cf. 25:4).

The Babylonians destroyed the Assyrian empire in 612 BC, and pushed south toward Egypt, and Israel. Because of failed political maneuvering, Israel became a vassal state of Babylon in 605 BC. There was discontent and simmering nationalism, however, which led to rebellion against Babylonian control. After

years of struggle, the Babylonians took Jerusalem in 598 BC, deported a number of Israelite leaders to Babylon, and set a puppet king over Israel. Unrest continued with political intrigue that included rebellion prompted by attempted alliances with several surrounding nations.

Finally, in 586 the Babylonians sent a large army into Palestine to put an end to the rebellions. As a result Jerusalem was totally destroyed and a second wave of deportees was taken to Babylon. Several other nations were also disciplined for their part in the ongoing turmoil.

Ezekiel was among the first deportees and probably wrote much of the book from the perspective of exile in Babylon between the first deportation in 598 and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. The oracles we are looking at came from the period immediately preceding the destruction of Jerusalem as Nebuchadnezzar marched south from Assyria along the Mediterranean coast via Tyre and Sidon before he turned toward Jerusalem on his way to Egypt.

The specific oracle under consideration is against the Phoenician city of Tyre in Ezekiel 26, and is dated 586. To understand this oracle, we also need to know a little about Tyre. Tyre was a major seaport for the world renowned sailors and merchants, the Phoenicians. It was a wealthy city since it was the primary commercial seaport in the Eastern Mediterranean linking shipping to Cyprus, Italy, Greece, Spain, and North Africa with land caravans from Arabia, Babylon, Persia, and as far east as India.

At this time, the main part of Tyre was an island city about a mile off the coast of what is now Lebanon. There were smaller villages on the mainland, but the city itself was an offshore seaport. Because of its location, it could be easily defended and could be re-supplied from the sea.

Now, note Ezekiel's prediction about the destruction of Tyre at the hands of the Babylonians.

26:3 therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and will bring up many nations against you, as the sea brings up its waves. 26:4 They shall destroy the walls of Tyre, and break down her towers; and I will scrape her soil from her, and make her a bare rock. 26:5 She shall be in the midst of the sea a place for the spreading of nets; for I have spoken, says the Lord GOD; and she shall become a spoil to the nations; 26:6 and her daughters on the mainland shall be slain by the sword. Then they will know that I am the LORD.

This is a rather unambiguous prediction. The city will be totally destroyed, including the city walls and defensive towers. The city would be leveled like a rock. In typical prophetic fashion, there is an interesting word play here, since the Hebrew word for Tyre means "rock," the city of "Rock" will become a bare rock. The mainland villages ("her daughters") will also be destroyed. This is all put under the rubric of the prophetic word that comes from God: "I have spoken" and "says Yahweh." All of this will be a sign that God is indeed God.

But the oracle goes on:

26:7 "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will bring upon Tyre from the north Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses and chariots, and with horsemen and a host of many soldiers. 26:8 He will slay with the sword your daughters on the mainland; he will set up a siege wall against you, and throw up a mound against you, and raise a roof of shields against you. 26:9 He will direct the shock of his battering rams against your walls, and with his axes he will break down your towers. 26:10 His horses will be so many that their dust will cover you; your walls will shake at the noise of the horsemen and wagons and chariots, when he enters your gates as one enters a city which has been breached. 26:11 With the hoofs of his horses he will trample all your streets; he will slay your people with the sword; and your mighty pillars will fall to the ground. 26:12 They will make a spoil of your riches and a prey of your merchandise; they will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses; your stones and timber and soil they will cast into the midst of the waters. 26:13 And I will stop the music of your songs, and the sound of your lyres

shall be heard no more. 26:14 I will make you a bare rock; you shall be a place for the spreading of nets; you shall never be rebuilt; for I the LORD have spoken, says the Lord GOD

In case there was any ambiguity in the first oracle, this one is even more specific. It is not just “many nations” who will plunder Tyre. It will be a specific nation, Babylonia, and a specific king, Nebuchadnezzar (sometimes called Nebuchadnezzar). It seems fairly obvious here that Ezekiel had heard reports of the Babylonian march southward, and he predicts, as a prophet of God, what will unfold as Nebuchadnezzar’s army punishes the nations for their rebellion. They will lay siege to Tyre, take the city and destroy it, kill its inhabitants, and loot its riches (which was a way to pay soldiers in the ancient world). He goes so far as to say that after its destruction, Tyre will never again be rebuilt. There are actually a series of such oracles that continue through chapter 28.

So, here is a very specific prediction coming from a particular historical circumstance, but couched in all the traditional prophetic formulae that say this is a “word” from the Lord. **The problem is that very little of this actually came to pass!** In fact, it badly missed how history actually unfolded.

We know from other historical records, including the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, that Nebuchadnezzar did, indeed, take and destroy the mainland part of the city, and then lay siege to the island city of Tyre. However, the Babylonian army was a land based army with no ships, which made it very difficult to lay siege effectively to an island fortress that had an armada of ships at its disposal. Nebuchadnezzar spent 13 years in the siege of Tyre and was never able to take the city. He finally abandoned the attempt sometime in 573/572 and put his resources into the invasion of Egypt, having already destroyed the Israelite stronghold in Jerusalem.

The city of Tyre did pass into Babylonian vassalage, but that was the result of a negotiated settlement that required tribute, a form of taxation (or extortion). The city of Tyre was not destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar or the Babylonians, and in fact continued to thrive as a commercial center.

Now, some who want to maintain the absolute inerrancy of biblical prophecy point to the fact that Tyre **was** eventually destroyed, and so the accuracy of Ezekiel’s prophecy is vindicated. Tyre was, indeed, destroyed in 332 BC by the Greek Alexander of Macedon (Alexander the Great). He used the ingenious tactic of using rubble from the destroyed mainland settlements to build a causeway to the island, providing a land bridge for his troops. Since that time, Tyre has no longer been an island, now connected to the mainland by a narrow isthmus.

So, the inerrantists would claim, the prophecy was really a **long range** prediction even though Ezekiel himself thought it was a short range prediction. But this raises another whole series of serious problems, and sounds far more like the rationalization of a position in spite of contrary evidence than it does a careful analysis of the biblical text. There are still several aspects of the Ezekiel prophecy unresolved.

1) Even though Alexander did, indeed, destroy the city of Tyre, it was immediately rebuilt and became an important Greek, and later Roman, seaport. It still exists today as a resort city of Lebanon. This clearly violates Ezekiel’s judgment that it would never be rebuilt and become a bare rock upon which to dry fishnets.

2) There is no internal rationale for changing the specific reference to *Babylonians* and assume that it really means *Greeks*, or to change *Nebuchadnezzar* to *Alexander*. If the text were inerrant in the way that many claim it to be, then we should be able to read “Greeks” and “Alexander” here. Again, this sounds suspiciously like an attempt to preserve a certain view of prophecy that the evidence will not support.

3) There are serious implications about the nature of Scripture and revelation (and God!) involved here. To maintain the “long range” view, Ezekiel, facing one urgent historical situation for which the people needed an immediate word from the Lord, actually and unknowingly addressed a situation 250 years in the future, spoke of a nation that had not yet emerged on the scene of world history, referred to persons and events for

which he could have no direct knowledge, and predicted world events that involved huge shifts in how history unfolded from his own time. In other words, the only way this position can be maintained is to affirm both that history is predetermined, and that Scripture is verbally given to the prophet without any awareness on his part of the actual meaning of what he was being told (100% God!). In fact, it even deceives him into thinking he was actually talking about his own situation when in fact he was talking about a situation centuries in the future. This, as it often does, assumes a certain theory of inspiration of Scripture in order to maintain its inerrancy, which is then used in a circular fashion, to confirm the same theories of inspiration (see [Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture](#) and [God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Human Freedom](#)).

4) Even beyond that, there is some sense that Ezekiel was himself worse than in the dark about his own prophecy. He seems to have rather badly misunderstood his own message, because he seems to believe that he is talking about the Babylonians and Nebuchadnezzar, when in reality, according to this view, he is talking about the Greeks and Alexander. This raises other serious questions about how we at any time in history can understand God's work in the world. This seems to make Scripture more obscure than it makes it more authoritative.

5) What good is a prophetic word, or Scripture, if it has little or no meaning for 200 or 1,000 or 2,000 years when the precise "fulfillment" finally comes about? This reduces God's word to a puzzle to be solved, or something that has little relevance to ordinary living because there is no way to tell, until after the "fulfillment," whether it has any meaning for today or not. It is not a living word that shapes how God's people live their life as His people *now*, but is, at best, only a pregnant word with some potential that we may or may not understand, and may never live to see. The word of God is not redemptive for God's people in an ongoing way, but is reduced to the level of proof to bolster our own criteria of validation.

All this says that to attempt to relate this prophecy to events 250 years later simply to vindicate a certain view of prophecy is not valid, and borders on not dealing with the biblical text honestly.

But there is even more compelling evidence from within Scripture itself, indeed, from Ezekiel himself, that this view is deficient. In 571 BC, two years or so **after** Nebuchadnezzar abandoned the siege of Tyre and it had become obvious to everyone that he would not be able to destroy the city, Ezekiel gives *another* prophecy concerning Tyre.

29:17 In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me: 29:18 "Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made his army labor hard against Tyre; every head was made bald and every shoulder was rubbed bare; yet neither he nor his army got anything from Tyre to pay for the labor that he had performed against it. 29:19 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will give the land of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and he shall carry off its wealth and despoil it and plunder it; and it shall be the wages for his army. 29:20 I have given him the land of Egypt as his recompense for which he labored, because they worked for me, says the Lord GOD.

Here, Ezekiel rather frankly acknowledges Nebuchadnezzar's failure to take Tyre even though he labored hard trying to do so (13 years!). So Ezekiel, seemingly without any embarrassment at the failure of his original prophecy, simply changed it *after the fact* to fit the historical situation as it had actually unfolded.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw the Babylonian invasion as part of the out working of the consequences of Israel's sins and repeated failure to serve and trust God. While God had fought for Israel in the past, both prophets vigorously proclaim, "Not this time!" So the Babylonians are unwittingly serving the purposes of God in the world, and the prophets conceptualize them as actually in the employ of God. And if they are working for God, God needs to pay their wages. Since they did not get anything from Tyre for their labor, Ezekiel affirms that God will allow them to be paid from the riches of Egypt (29:20).

Now, we do not know from historical records whether the Babylonians ever sacked Egypt. History is silent on this point. But it doesn't matter. The issue was never whether or not a certain historical event would unfold exactly in the specific way any particular prophet predicted that it would. History simply does not work that way, and that is not really the task of a prophet. The issue had always been the truth of what Ezekiel was proclaiming to the people about God and their responsibility and accountability to Him as their covenantal God. The prophet's role was to help the people respond faithfully to God *in their own time*. So, Ezekiel could change his prediction, and even admit that he got it wrong, because, finally, **the historical prediction was not his message!**

What is even more amazing is that the community of faith, perceptive enough to know that this failure was in the Ezekiel tradition, did not attempt to gloss it over or change it to fit some modern ideas of inerrancy and the absolute infallibility of prophetic prediction to fit within a certain view of how God orders the world. In other words, the community of faith who collected together Ezekiel's writings and oracles saw no problem in preserving this failure, even though they most likely knew about the criteria in Deuteronomy (18:22). They saw no problem because, I suggest, they understood that "prediction of the future" is not primarily what a prophet does, is not the final or only or most important test of a prophet of God, and because they had no need to establish or maintain any dimension of inerrancy.

And the important fact is, Ezekiel was right! He was not right about all of his historical predictions. But he was right in that the message he proclaimed about the nation of Israel, its responsibilities to God, and the consequences of their failure to respond to God in faithfulness was proven true in the flow of history (which is the heart of the Deuteronomy 18 passage). That is, the community could look back at Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, and understand that they had faithfully borne witness to God, even though virtually no one listened to them at the time. They knew that not every historical prediction, or even most of them, directly corresponded to some specific historical event. But the community understood Ezekiel's proclamation about God and His work with humanity, as they verified it in their own historical experience, to be a faithful witness to God.

There are other examples of prophecy that could be used here. And there are other theological implications of this particular sequence. But perhaps this is enough to evoke some thought about how we develop views of Scripture, and prophecy in particular, that takes seriously the evidence within Scripture itself.