

# OpenTheo

## June 21st: Ezekiel 47 & Acts 18:24—19:7

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Water flowing out from the temple. Contrasting disciples of John in Ephesus.

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## Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 47. Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold water was issuing from before the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the temple faced east. The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.

Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east, and behold the water was trickling out on the south side. Going on eastward, with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee deep.

Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist deep. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the

water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through.

And he said to me, Son of man, have you seen this? Then he led me back to the bank of the river. As I went back I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arava and enters the sea.

When the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh, so everything will live where the river goes.

Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglem, it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the great sea.

But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh. They are to be left for salt. And on the banks on both sides of the river there will grow all kinds of trees for food.

Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail. But they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.

Thus says the Lord God, This is the boundary by which you shall divide the land for inheritance among the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph shall have two portions, and you shall divide equally what I swore to give to your fathers. This land shall fall to you as your inheritance.

This shall be the boundary of the land. On the north side, from the great sea by way of Hethlon to Lebo-Hemath and on to Zidad, Beirothah, Zebraim, which lies on the border between Damascus and Hemath, as far as Hazar-Hatikhan, which is on the border of Horan, so the boundary shall run from the sea to Hazar-Inan, which is on the northern border of Damascus, with the border of Hemath to the north. This shall be the north side.

On the east side, the boundary shall run between Horan and Damascus, along the Jordan, between Gilead and the land of Israel, to the eastern sea and as far as Tamar. This shall be the east side. On the south side, it shall run from Tamar as far as the waters of Meribah-Kadesh, from there along the brook of Egypt to the great sea.

This shall be the south side. On the west side, the great sea shall be the boundary to a point opposite Lebo-Hemath. This shall be the west side.

So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the sojourners who reside among you and have had children among you. They shall be to you as native-born children of Israel.

With you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the sojourner resides, there you shall assign him his inheritance, declares the Lord God. The book of Ezekiel ends with an extended vision of a restored Israel.

The vision is of a symbolic restored order rather than that of the actual concrete restored order. In its glorious temple, within which the Lord has once more taken up his residence and its reordered land, we get a sense of what Israel could be and how the Lord would re-establish it after the exile. The details of its design and its measurements are densely symbolic.

Among other things, they present a jubilee-shaped reality. Ezekiel chapter 47 is the penultimate chapter of the book. It extends the hearer's attention out beyond the temple and the city and their practices and into the wider land.

Life flows forth from the temple to purify and water the land. The land is then divided. In Genesis chapter 2, from the Garden of Eden, came a riverhead that divided into four great rivers, verses 10 to 14 of that chapter.

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havala, where there is gold.

And the gold of that land is good. Bhallium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon.

It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Kush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The Garden of Eden was the original earthly sanctuary, a realm where the Lord dwelt in the midst of his people. It's a model for the wider world. It's a source of living water that flowed out into it.

Both the tabernacle and Solomon's temple had a lot of creation and Edenic symbolism. And the same is true of Ezekiel's temple. Back in chapter 43, the altar had to be purified for its use for sacrifice.

The land, however, is also impure, defiled by the iniquities of the people. However, now that the Lord is once more dwelling in the midst of his people, life can flow out to heal and revive a devastated land. In his vision, Ezekiel is brought to the door of the temple once more, where he sees water issuing from below its threshold facing east.

The stream trickles out toward the east, but rather than moving in a straight eastward direction, its course is more towards the southeast. Having seen the stream issuing forth from the sanctuary, Ezekiel is then led via the north gate round to the outside of the east-facing outer gate. As the Lord had entered via the east gate on his return to the

temple, it was closed to others leaving the temple by means of it, as chapter 44, verses 1-2 say.

So Ezekiel had to take a slightly more circuitous route to get there. Outside of the temple, Ezekiel sees the stream again, this time trickling out of the south side of the east gate. From the site of the temple, the water is directed towards the Dead Sea.

The observant hearer will notice that the Bronze Sea of Solomon's Temple was situated at the southeast corner of the house, but there is no Bronze Sea in Ezekiel's temple. In Ezekiel's temple, the stream proceeding from the house toward the south of the threshold towards the east takes the place of the Bronze Sea and the chariots of water associated with it. Conversely, the stream of Ezekiel's temple can help us better to understand the symbolism of the Bronze Sea in Solomon's temple.

Ezekiel's guide leads Ezekiel through the stream as they follow it. He measures it four times at 1,000 cubit intervals. The first time the water is ankle deep.

The second at 2,000 cubits. It is knee deep. The third at 3,000 cubits.

It's waist deep. The fourth measurement at 4,000 cubits is the final one. The water is then too deep to pass through on foot.

The stream flowing from the presence of the Lord is miraculously growing as it moves on. The river Head of Eden split into four great rivers to water the whole earth. Here the four measurements at 1,000 cubit intervals might imply the water's purpose for the cleansing of the whole land.

The bank of the river is made wonderfully fertile, abounding with trees on both sides where once was barren wilderness. The guide informs Ezekiel that the water from the temple flows towards the east and down into the Araba and the Dead or Salt Sea. The Dead Sea, a region that was formerly very fertile, was the region where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had once been.

It was devastated at the time of their cataclysmic destruction, which some scientists have recently speculated was the result of the explosion of a meteor above them, similar to that which occurred at Tunguska in Siberia. One of the most verdant and fruitful realms of the land was rendered uninhabitable and inhospitable to life for centuries to come. However, now this dead land and its literally dead sea are awakened into new life.

An old judgment is not only lifted but reversed. Land which was once cursed is now bountifully blessed. Everywhere that the water from the presence of the Lord flows, things are made fruitful.

Other passages in Scripture speak of the flowing out of healing waters from Jerusalem, a symbol of national cleansing, renewal and blessing, as the land is purified and made

fruitful by the Lord's return. Zechariah 14, verse 8, for instance. Joel 3, verse 18.

Behind such prophetic images we might also see statements as that of Psalm 46, verses 4-5. Not only does the water from the presence of the Lord heal the land, it also heals the sea. The sea that was once salt now is made fresh and teems with living creatures, as the waters did back in Genesis chapter 1. En Gedi and En Eglim, likely two cities on either side of the formerly dead sea, geographically bracket that entire body of water, which will now be a place of fruitfulness and life, with abundant fish of many different kinds.

It is a plentiful source for fishermen. There will be, however, some remnants of swamps and marshland. Daniel Bloch suggests that this might be on account of the economic value of the minerals found in such locations.

However, we would probably be better off looking for some symbolic meaning to this. Evergreen trees would flourish on the banks, bearing fresh fruit every month. The description of the trees might recall the description of the righteous man in Psalm 1, verse 3. Of course, since this is a symbolic vision, we might see an image of the restored presence of the Lord in the land, producing new righteous and life-giving pillars of society in the house of Israel.

Most notably, this imagery is taken up in Revelation chapter 22, verses 1-2. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. Also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.

The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. In Revelation, the trees by the river are the tree of life, with twelve kinds of fruit. As in the case of the trees in Ezekiel chapter 47, it yields its fruit every month.

The twelve kinds of fruit might alert us to the significance of the monthly yield of fruit, twelve months each year. The trees, so connected with the number twelve, invite us to see some association with the house of Israel itself. Several scholars have argued that the imagery of this chapter is not merely taken up by John in Revelation, but is also used by him in his Gospel, especially in John chapter 21.

In the Gospel of John, the theme of water flowing out from Jesus appears at a number of points. Jesus, of course, is the new temple. In John chapter 7 verses 38-39, Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.

Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. Jesus is the source of the Spirit, the new temple from which the gift of the Spirit will flow at Pentecost. Also in John chapter 19 verse 34, when Jesus is on the cross, All of this leads

us to John chapter 21, where the disciples, by the instruction of the resurrected Christ, take in a miraculous catch of fish.

Strangely, the exact number of these fish is given to us, 153. It seems surprising that the disciples would be counting fish when the risen Christ is with them. However, Jesus had previously charged them to take note of the numbers of the baskets of leftovers that they had gathered after feeding the 5,000 and the 4,000.

It seems likely that they counted and recorded the number of fish here, at Christ's own instruction. 153, as St. Augustine noticed, is the triangular number of 17. When you add up 17 and 16 and 15 and 14 and 13, all the way down to 1, you get a total of 153.

An important feature of Hebrew and Greek is the fact that letters can also function as numbers. The practice of determining the numerical value of particular words is called gematria. It is widely held by commentators that John uses this in revelation for the number 666.

Early Christians were familiar with the use of gematria, and in the Epistle of Barnabas, one of the earliest Christian texts that we have, gematria is used to determine the symbolic meaning of the 318 men who accompany Abraham in Genesis chapter 14. The place names of Ezekiel chapter 47 verse 10, mentioned in connection with the great abundance of fish, are En-Gedi and En-Eglim. The numeric value associated with the first is 17.

The numeric value associated with the second is 153. By itself, this might just be a curiosity. However, as John speaks of life giving water flowing out, and the number 153 is the number of a great catch of fish, this seems to be less random.

That this number would be connected with the one verse in the Old Testament that speaks of such a remarkable catch of fish, is clearly remarkable, but once we have seen the connections, it is probably not a weak one. While the typical hearer of John chapter 21 will think little of the number, seeing it as but a reference to a historical detail, the close reader might discover an authenticating sign of the connection with Ezekiel's prophecy. The barren land made fertile with trees might connect with the restoration of the people of Israel.

The barren waters made fruitful with fish might connect with the cleansing and enlivening of the resident aliens within the land, making them participants in the life of the Lord's people too. In chapter 16, the Lord had said that Sodom and Samaria would return to their former state, perhaps part of the meaning here is that the non-Israelite peoples of the land and the resident aliens, once judged and cursed in the destruction of Sodom, are now going to enjoy the blessings of the Lord too, and be knit in to the wider people. Internal to the symbolic picture of the passage, it also makes the territories of the tribes in the lower part of the land fertile.

The rest of the chapter presents the boundaries of the restored land. This begins a reallocation of the territory of the land in the chapter that follows, envisaging a sort of renewal of the initial entry into and possession of the land, with each of the twelve tribes being allocated their own inheritance. The land, notably, does not include the Transjordanian territories of Reuben Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Those territories were never within the promised land proper, but were parts of Israel outside of the land. Rather, the territory as described in Ezekiel chapter 47, most closely corresponds to the territories marked out in Numbers chapter 34, verses 1-12. All of the tribes would now fully enter into the possession of the promised land proper, even though their respective territories are much changed within it.

One of the most arresting and significant features of the new arrangement is the fact that faithful resident aliens that have settled among the Israelites, and had children among them, should be included within the nation, being apportioned territories with the tribes in whose territory they reside. Isaiah chapter 56, verses 6-7 speak of something similar. "...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." Resident aliens had hitherto been prevented from possessing land in such a manner.

However, now the blessings of God's presence are spreading out further. This is, I believe, connected with the vision of the waters of the inland salt sea being made fresh. Former Gentile outsiders are rendered insiders to the covenant, the many fish of the resident aliens joining the many trees of the land.

A question to consider, how does Ezekiel's vision, and the historical situation it prophesies, anticipate the greater flowing forth of blessings through the death and resurrection of Christ? Acts chapter 18, verse 24, to chapter 19, verse 7. Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord.

And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.

When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples, and he said to them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And they said, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

And he said, Into what then were you baptized? They said, Into John's baptism. And Paul

said, John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all. In Acts chapter 18 verse 23, Paul begins his third missionary journey, not long after returning to Antioch after his second.

On his return from that journey, in verse 19, he had left Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, which is the location of the events at the end of chapter 18 and the beginning of chapter 19. Paul had intended to spread the gospel in the region of Asia on his second missionary journey, but had been prevented by the Holy Spirit. Now, on his third missionary journey, he probably intends to visit places that he hadn't been able to visit previously.

Ephesus was a huge city by ancient standards, one of the largest in the entire Roman Empire. It was thriving and prosperous in one of the wealthiest regions of the Empire, with possibly more than a quarter of a million inhabitants, although estimates of ancient city sizes are very vague in most cases. It would be a perfect hub from which the message of Christ could spread further and would provide a stronger bond between the churches in Galatia, Phrygia, Pamphylia and Cilicia with the newer churches in Macedonia and Achaia.

Ephesus historically had ties to Athens, but was a very cosmopolitan place with lots of foreign religions within a primarily Hellenistic cultural setting. Ephesus in Asia also seemed to have been a focus for the Apostle John's later ministry, with the book of Revelation being addressed to seven churches in the region, Ephesus being one of them. The story is picked up before Paul arrives in Ephesus, however.

Aquila and Priscilla are still there, where Paul had left them, but an important new figure comes upon the scene, Apollos. Apollos is, like the others, a diaspora Jew, whereas Paul is from Cilicia and Aquila from Pontus, Apollos is from Alexandria. Alexandria was second only to Rome as a city of the Empire.

It was the largest city in the East, was an important site of learning, and had a large and influential Jewish community. Alexandria, while in Egypt, was founded by Macedonians, and elite status was held by Greeks. It had a huge Jewish population, with lots of tensions between the Greeks and Jews of the city.

Philo of Alexandria had likely died only a few years previously, and it is entirely possible that Apollos had encountered him, and not beyond the bounds of possibility that he had studied under him. Philo was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, most famous for his more allegorical reading of the scriptures, which harmonised them with Stoic philosophy. Apollos is a gifted orator, and powerful in the scriptures.



The extent and nature of his knowledge when he first came to Ephesus is unclear. It seems that he had heard about the message, and even the death and resurrection of Christ. He had received instruction concerning Jesus, but he might have been ignorant of the Church and its mission.

He knew about John the Baptist and the movement formed around him, but was unaware of the form that the Jesus movement was taking. One can imagine, as early disciples scattered and passed through various parts of the empire, many people in places that wouldn't have a church for several years yet would have had a rudimentary but incomplete knowledge of the message, and many others would have had a distorted second-hand impression. He is described as fervent in spirit, which might be a reference either to the fervency of his own spirit, or to that of the Holy Spirit.

If it is a reference to the latter, it suggests that Apollos had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, even though he was not yet a member of the Church. Given the contrast between Apollos and the twelve disciples of John the Baptist in the passage that follows, this might be a reasonable supposition. The Holy Spirit, throughout the Book of Acts, frequently displays his power through bold and effective speech, which Apollos undoubtedly manifests.

Indeed, the description of Apollos here might remind us of no one so much as Stephen, back in chapter 6. Apollos speaks in the synagogue, where he is heard by Priscilla and Aquila, who take him aside and instruct him further and more accurately in the way of God. It seems likely that this was a more extended process of further instruction, delivered in the context of hospitality in their own home, rather than just being a few words exchanged after the synagogue meeting. Their taking him aside implies that they did not publicly respond to him or confront him.

Apollos would likely not only have been more receptive to such further instruction, but might well have been eager to receive it from people with a clearer and more extensive knowledge of the message of Jesus than he had received. Priscilla's role in Apollos' instruction here has provoked much discussion in various quarters concerned with the question of women in pastoral ministry. Priscilla's active participation in the explanation of the way of God is implied, as is the fact that she is educated and informed, and well suited to pass on such instruction.

While this was noteworthy, and would have presented Priscilla as an exceptional woman, it wouldn't have been that scandalous or out of keeping with societal norms. The areas that would have been more restricted would be in public realms, with women acting in public disputation, or in the oversight of communities, both of which are matters that Paul speaks of in his letters. Having been so instructed, Apollos crosses over into Achaia, with the commendations of the Ephesian Christians.

In this move, Apollos would have strengthened the bonds between the churches of

Ephesus and Corinth. Priscilla and Aquila had come to Ephesus from Corinth, and now Apollos was sent as a sort of return gift from Ephesus to Corinth. In Achaia, he once again demonstrated his giftedness in speech and argument, publicly refuting Jewish opponents of the Christians, demonstrating from the scriptures themselves that the Messiah was Jesus.

This would presumably have involved showing that the Old Testament texts concerning the Messiah clearly pointed to Jesus, that he fit their description. A different encounter is described at the beginning of chapter 19. Apollos had only known the baptism of John, and when Paul arrives in Ephesus, by which time Apollos was in Corinth, he met some disciples of John who were in a somewhat similar, though contrasting, condition.

The contrast between the two is well observed by Robert Tannehill. Both know only the baptism of John, but they differ at two significant points. First, the effect of the Spirit is manifest in Apollos' speech, but the disciples in Ephesus have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

Second, Apollos, knowing only the baptism of John, is nevertheless able to teach accurately the things concerning Jesus. In contrast, Paul must instruct the other group that John's baptism of repentance was meant to prepare the people for faith in Jesus, the one coming after John. In the case of Apollos, John's baptism led him to teach about Jesus, because he accepted John's testimony about the coming one, and recognised Jesus as its fulfilment.

However, the response by the so-called disciples to Paul's first question in chapter 19, verse 2, seems to lead him to doubt whether they even knew about Jesus, and the need for faith in him. Paul has to instruct the disciples of John further in the message of John, and then to connect that to Jesus, to whom it was supposed to point. The ministry of John was the starting point for the telling of the Gospel in the Gospel narratives, and its importance was also underlined at the beginning of the Book of Acts, and on a few further occasions within it.

Once the twelve disciples of John received the message of Jesus, they were baptised. Paul laid his hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit, demonstrating the reception of the Spirit by speaking in tongues and prophesying. Whereas Apollos seemingly did not require baptism, they did.

One of the things that these two accounts illustrate is the manner in which the ministry of the early church and its missionaries would have involved the delivery of updates through the many nodes in the growing network of churches and ministers, to people who needed various degrees of upgrades or patches of their knowledge and experience of God's recent work in their days. A question to consider. What do we learn of Apollos elsewhere in the scripture, especially in the Book of 1 Corinthians?