

# OpenTheo

## June 8th: Ezekiel 13 & Acts 11:19-30

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Against the false prophets. The Church in Antioch.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

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## Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 13. The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel, who are prophesying, and say to those who prophesy from their own hearts, Hear the word of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord God, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing. Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel. You have not gone up into the breaches or built up a wall for the house of Israel that it might stand in battle in the day of the Lord.

They have seen false visions and lying divinations. They say, Declares the Lord, when the Lord has not sent them, and yet they expect him to fulfil their word. Have you not seen a false vision and uttered a lying divination whenever you have said, Declares the Lord, although I have not spoken? Therefore thus says the Lord God, Because you have

uttered falsehood and seen lying visions, therefore behold, I am against you, declares the Lord God.

My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and who give lying divinations. They shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord God.

Precisely because they have misled my people, saying, Peace, when there is no peace, and because when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash, say to those who smear it with whitewash that it shall fall, there will be a deluge of rain, and you, O great hailstones, will fall, and a stormy wind break out, and when the wall falls, will it not be said to you, Where is the coating with which you smeared it? Therefore thus says the Lord God, I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath, and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger, and great hailstones in wrath to make a full end, and I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord. Thus will I spend my wrath upon the wall, and upon those who have smeared it with whitewash, and I will say to you, The wall is no more, nor those who smeared it, the prophets of Israel who prophesied concerning Jerusalem, and saw visions of peace for her, when there was no peace, declares the Lord God.

And you, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own hearts, prophesy against them, and say, Thus says the Lord God, Woe to the women who sew magic bands upon all wrists, and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature, in the hunt for souls. Will you hunt down souls belonging to my people, and keep your own souls alive? You have profaned me among my people for handfuls of barley, and for pieces of bread, putting to death souls who should not die, and keeping alive souls who should not live, by your lying to my people, who listen to lies. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against your magic bands with which you hunt the souls like birds, and I will tear them from your arms, and I will let the souls whom you hunt go free, the souls like birds.

Your veils also I will tear off, and deliver my people out of your hand, and they shall be no more in your hand as prey, and you shall know that I am the Lord. Because you have disheartened the righteous falsely, although I have not grieved him, and you have encouraged the wicked, that he should not turn from his evil way to save his life. Therefore you shall no more see false visions, nor practice divination.

I will deliver my people out of your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord. Ezekiel chapter 13 contains two oracles against false prophets, probably joined together because of their common theme. In the book of Jeremiah we see the great influence that

false prophets had during this period in Judas' history.

As Daniel Block notes, they share a very similar outline. They begin with the preamble in verses 2-3 and then 17-18. Then there are the charges against the prophets in verses 3-7 and 18-19.

The announcement of judgment in verse 8-16 and 20-23. This can be subdivided into two parts, in verses 8-9 and 10-16, and then in verses 20-21 and 22-23. The two oracles concern first male prophets and then female witches.

Both of these groups represent threats to the people. The false prophets are a threat particularly to the people as a whole, and the witches a pervasive threat to individuals among the people. The false prophets are proclaiming their own imaginations but declaring them to be according to the word of the Lord.

They are foolish, they are invoking the name of the Lord in support of their prophecies and breaking the Ten Commandments in the process, and yet they don't think about what the consequences might be. They are following their own spirit, they are acting and speaking of their own initiative. They have seen nothing, their visions are empty, there is no truth to anything that they are saying.

In a powerful image they are described as being like jackals among ruins. Jackals were scavenging creatures associated with desolate places, and these prophets are such persons. The nation of Judah, the beleaguered city of Jerusalem, the people, both those who remain in the land and those who have been exiled to Babylon, are all devastated, and yet the false prophets continue to ply their trade.

One can imagine that a number of the false prophets were deported along with other members of Jehoiachin's court, and these men continue to have an influence even in the land of exile. Back in chapter 3 Ezekiel was commanded to act as a watchman for the house of Israel, and a similar image is explored in verse 5. The task of the prophet is to go into the breaches, or to heal the breaches. In a situation where the wall defending the people has broken down, he must either defend them by standing in the place where there is a gap, or he must do what he can to cause the wall to be rebuilt.

However, these false prophets, rather than standing in the breach and defending the people and ensuring that righteousness is upheld, have whitewashed over the cracks. Rather than loudly drawing attention to the failures of the moral structure of the nation, they have concealed its lack of integrity. They have spoken as if they have the Lord at their own whim and pleasure, fancying that the Lord will act according to their lying divinations.

All they have ended up doing is taking the name of the Lord in vain. In verses 8 and 9 the Lord declares himself to be against them. They had once declared that the hand of

the Lord was upon them, causing them to speak the words that they had spoken.

But now the Lord's hand really will be upon them, but his hand will be upon them to destroy them. They will not be counted among the congregation of the people, they will not be enrolled in its number, and they will not return to the land or see it again. The Lord in his judgment upon them has excommunicated them.

Their statements of peace in the absence of peace merely serve to disguise the deep cracks among the people, and as a result those cracks were not addressed. The words of faithful prophets like Jeremiah were shouted down and dismissed on account of the words of these false prophets. There is a sort of collaborative hypocrisy at work here.

The people and their rulers build an unsound society, and then the prophets come along to put the words of God as whitewash over it, to make it appear beautiful and secure when it is nothing of the kind. In scripture our attention is occasionally drawn to the fact that people want to believe false prophecies. In many cases, even while they know that they are false, they will persist in believing them.

The dissembling of the truth in a false appearance is desirable in itself, even when people know that the reality is masked. However, the Lord promises a storm, and in this storm the true character of the wall will be revealed. With a deluge of rain, great hailstones and wind, the unsound structure will be revealed for what it is, and will come down.

The storm in question is the Lord's own wrath that will come upon the people on account of their hypocrisy and evil. It will cut off both the society that has been whitewashed and the people who put the whitewash upon it. Their visions of false peace, condemned by Jeremiah and others, will truly be revealed for what they are.

In the second oracle of this chapter, Ezekiel is instructed to speak to the daughters of his people. These women, like the men before them, are prophesying out of their own hearts. However, these women seem to be given to more occult practices, practices of magic that they probably picked up from the people around them in Babylon.

It is likely that through black magic they are attempting to control souls of other persons, using magical bands and bracelets, amulets, charms, talismans and other such things. They are praying upon souls. They are profaning the Lord among his people, presumably by invoking his name in their charms and ceremonies.

The barley and the bread mentioned in verse 19 are probably not the price for their services, but rather, as Moshi Greenberg argues, materials with which they will perform their rituals. By their magical arts, these women are profaning the name of the Lord, but also trying to take his people from him. The Lord is jealous for his people, but these women are trying to capture and control them.

The Lord would rob them of their prey, and though they have invoked the name of the Lord in their magical arts, the Lord would prostrate those arts and their schemes, and as he cut off their false visions and rendered their arts ineffectual, the Lord would demonstrate his true identity. As in verse 9, 14 and 21, verse 23 ends with a recognition formula, and you shall know that I am the Lord. A question to consider.

Can you think of examples of people falsely invoking the name of the Lord? Why do you think some people receive these messages, even when they don't truly believe them? Acts chapter 11 verses 19 to 30. Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. Now in those days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world.

This took place in the days of Claudius. So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

From the end of chapter 11 of the book of Acts, the central site in the mission of the church will start to move out from Jerusalem to places like Antioch. Antioch will become the sending church for the mission of Barnabas and Saul. Disputes in Antioch will also later precipitate the calling of the Jerusalem council.

Although we have just read the gospel going to the Gentiles in the story of Cornelius, we go back to events before this to explain the movement out to places like Antioch. It was with the persecution that arose after Stephen's death that Christians scattering throughout the empire began to spread the gospel as they went. This was not a concerted, organised mission.

It was just a natural outworking of events. The Lord created the impetus through the

persecution. And then the church grew as it followed this unexpected wind of the spirit.

It was a particular group of early disciples that spearheaded this movement, men of Cyprus and Cyrene. It was through such men that the gospel finally arrived in Antioch. Prior to this point, the people who had been scattering had been speaking only to Jews.

Presumably the people in question here are both Palestinian Jews and Jews of the Diaspora. Antioch was a very natural location to go if you wanted to reach Jews of the Diaspora. Not only was it one of the top five cities of the empire, it boasted one of the highest populations of Jews outside of the land of Palestine.

It is important to remember that the majority of the population of Jews lived outside of the land of Palestine. Jews made up up to 10% of the population of the Roman Empire and they lived in many different regions of it. By the time the gospel was spread out through people like Paul, practically every city that they would go to would already have a Jewish community set up within it.

All of this really prepared the ground for the gospel to be spread. In Antioch, this new centre for Christianity outside of the land of Palestine, the gospel spread not just to the Diaspora Jews but also to the Hellenistic community of the city. Proselytes and God-fearers similar to people like Cornelius were now being brought into the orbit of the gospel message.

Not only is the gospel taking root in Gentile cities among Jewish communities, it is also being spread in those cities beyond their Jewish populations. The ministry of these Cypriots and Cyrenians receives great success and news of their work reaches the ears of the church in Jerusalem who send Barnabas to visit the church. Barnabas back in chapter four is described to us as a Levite of Cyprus.

As a Cypriot he probably knew a number of the people who had gone and formed this church in the first place. He might well have had personal reasons to want to visit, along with the official reasons for which he was sent. The Holy Spirit leads the way in the mission of the early church, but the church is often sent to these places to witness to what the Lord is achieving.

The Jerusalem church's official recognition of what God is doing in various parts of the world is an important part of the development that is taking place. As God spreads his people out in the mission of the church, he is also gathering in, joining people together in acts of mutual recognition, particularly in relationship to the source of it all, in the Jerusalem church from which the mission had first proceeded. Barnabas had previously played a mediating role in his recognition of Saul as a true convert, advocating for him to the Jerusalem church who distrusted the truth of his conversion.

In visiting the church, Barnabas is able to encourage and build them up. His presence

among them connects them more closely to the life of the wider church so that they are not just one isolated community. This is something that will be happening throughout the story of the Book of Acts, as many missionary journeys serve to connect the many different churches together in a greater fabric of union.

As he did back in chapter four, Luke presents the character of Barnabas in the most glowing categories. Barnabas is a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and his ministry is extremely successful. And so he goes to Tarsus to seek Saul, in order that Saul might help him in his ministry.

Barnabas had presumably heard Paul's testimony and knew that he was a man appointed to bear Christ's name before the Gentiles. It would only seem appropriate that Saul was involved in this mission in Antioch. Tarsus, although it was Saul's birthplace and a site of significant learning, it was not a place where there was as large a Jewish community as there would be in Antioch.

Although we might reasonably assume that Saul was engaged in evangelism in the city of Tarsus, he would have far more promising soil for such a ministry in the strategic city of Antioch. While the early Jesus movement referred to itself as the Way and other things like that, in Antioch they were referred to as Christians for the first time, seemingly by outsiders. In this term, their opponents might have sought to characterise them as supporters of a pretended to Messiah status.

Although it does not seem to be a term that Christians first used of themselves, by the time that Luke wrote the book of Acts we should presume that it was fairly widespread. Barnabas and Saul ministered in the city of Antioch for a whole year, and even after this year was over, Antioch continued to be a base for them. Strengthening the communication between the cities of Antioch and Jerusalem.

During this period, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, bringing word of a famine that would afflict the whole world. This famine occurred in the days of Claudius, presumably in 45-46 AD. There are several examples of prophets in the book of Acts.

Prophecy was one of the ways in which the gift of the spirit at Pentecost was manifest, and as a gift within the life of the church, it was given great significance. Prophets seemed to have played a more advisory than directive role. Later on Agabus would foretell the fact that Paul would be captured and imprisoned in Jerusalem, and many would seek to discourage Paul from going down there.

Yet Paul was free to persist in going to Jerusalem, without being seen to disobey the word of the Lord in so doing. Here the message concerns a worldwide famine that would particularly afflict the people in Judea. Although described as worldwide, this is hyperbolic.

The point is more that the famine is going to be comprehensively affecting the world around Jerusalem. Judea and all the places associated with it are going to be hit by this famine. Egypt, Syria, Judea and Greece are all going to feel its impact.

The disciples in Antioch respond by gathering together resources to send to the Judean Christians. This gift to the Christians in Judea and Jerusalem was a way of expressing the unity of the church. Each was giving according to his ability in order to provide for the needs of another part of the church.

The church was knit together in one, as men from Jerusalem had served the spiritual needs of those in Antioch, so Antioch, in Judea's time of need, would provide for their material necessities. Later in the ministry of Paul, his mission to the Gentiles involved a collection for the saints in Jerusalem, as a very concrete manifestation of the unity of the church as Jew and Gentile that he proclaimed in his theology. A question to consider.

How in the story of the church's growth to this point can we see that God is the one directing its growth and its movement outward?